

College Football **PREVIEW**

AUGUST 10, 2015

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**SI'S
TOP 25**

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SCHOOL?

DAK PRESCOTT

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SEC Star

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LaQUAN McGOWAN

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The 400-pound
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JOEY BOSA**
Make the Buckeyes
Ready To Repeat

RING MASTERS

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College Football PREVIEW

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end DeflateGate



+ **BIG EXPERIMENT**

Safeties around the country will be trembling in fear at the prospect of tackling McGowan.

PHOTOGRAPH BY:
GREG NELSON
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

SI HAS REGIONAL COVERS THIS WEEK:
ANDREW HANCOCK FOR SI
(OHIO STATE); TREVOR PAULHUS
FOR SI (TCU); TODD ROSENBERG
FOR SI (NOTRE DAME);
MICHAEL MULVEY FOR SI
(MISSISSIPPI STATE)



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Schedule breakdowns, x-factors and opposing coaches' takes

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The teams and players to watch from the nonpower conferences
By Chris Johnson

SI.COM

FOR AUG. 10, 2015



The Kids in the Hall

This week SI.com honors the 2015 Pro Football Hall of Fame class with a look back at the careers of the inductees, including wide receiver **Tim Brown** [81], linebacker **Charles Haley** [94] and running back **Jerome Bettis** [36]. Go to SI.com/nfl for coverage, including photo galleries, articles from the SI Vault and Phil Taylor's interview with Brown as he reflects on his 14 years in the league. *SI Now* and host Maggie Gray will be on the scene in Canton with broadcasts on Thursday and Friday at 2:30 p.m. EDT. For all matters NFL, including a comprehensive training camp tour, check out Peter King's newly redesigned site at mmqb.si.com

Training with SI

Getting in shape? Have a new workout? Share your exercise photos and your routine with us on Twitter and Instagram using the hashtag #trainingwithSI and you could be featured in an upcoming issue! Plus, be sure to check out the training regimens of today's top athletes at SI.com/trainingwith, presented by **Edge® Shave gel**.

SI PRO-FILES



NFL defensive tackle **Mike Lodish** and his peanut brittle enterprise, as well as other sports figures turned business leaders, go to SI.com/Pro-Files, a series from the editors of *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* and *FORTUNE*.

As successful as many athletes are in their sports, some find even more success after they retire. To learn about former

SI.COM'S TOP STORIES

1 Birth of a League

The architects of MLS recall the 20-year-old league's early days

2 Writing a New Story

For a roundup of last week's most popular stories on SI.com—including Tom Verducci's feature on **A-Rod**'s season for the ages—go to SI.com/topstories



3 Analyzing College Hoops Transfers

How often do elite basketball prospects transfer between high schools, decommit to colleges or later transfer?

4 By the Numbers

A look at the greatest college football players to wear numbers 1 through 99

5 Hot Seat, Cool Coughlin

The Giants have missed the playoffs the last three seasons, but coach Tom Coughlin isn't worried

SI Digital Bonus

Home Economics

From the SI Vault
Feb. 21, 2000



The inside story of the deal that sent Ken Griffey Jr. back to Cincinnati at a bargain rate
By Tom Verducci & Stephen Cannella

To read this and other stories from the *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* archive, go to SI.com/vault



FUN



FUN



FUN



TO EACH THEIR OWN SATISFACTION





+

1
of
3



**Leading
Off**

Rowdy Duty

■ Ronda Rousey needed all of 34 seconds to dispatch Bethe Correia of Brazil in their UFC 190 bantamweight championship fight last Saturday in Rio de Janeiro. The unbeaten Rousey, whose last four title defenses have lasted a total of 130 seconds, disdained her signature arm bar and mainly used her fists during an all-out assault that she dedicated to the late pro wrestler Rowdy Roddy Piper (page 23). (Piper, who died last Friday, inspired her to go by “Rowdy” Ronda Rousey.) She mouthed “Don’t cry” to Correia as she lay on the canvas.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
BUDA MENDES
ZUFFA LLC/GETTY IMAGES



Leading
Off

+

2
of
3

Braking Bad

■ Brad Keselowski ran over the front-tire carrier and clipped the jackman when his brakes locked as he pulled into his pit stall during Sunday's Windows 10 400 at Pocono Raceway. None of the crewmen were injured, but Keselowski was black-flagged for an uncontrolled tire. When the race resumed on Lap 66 of 160 in the NASCAR Sprint Cup race, Keselowski was 37th; he worked his way back to finish second, behind Matt Kenseth.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CHRIS TROTMAN
GETTY IMAGES







Leading
Off

+

3
of
3

Special Forces

■ At the 14th Special Olympics Summer World Games in Los Angeles, 1960 Olympic gold medal decathlete Rafer Johnson lit the torch on July 25 with sprinter Destiny Sanchez (1); Monaco's Khadija Danziger put the shot (2); the 5,000-meter medalists rejoiced (3); swimmer Ana Baltag of Romania celebrated bronze in the 50 freestyle (4); U.S. gymnast Lee Dockins perfected her poses (5); Maria Shriver (6) and USC football players (7) provided support; the fast breaks were plentiful (8); and Michael Phelps welcomed his fellow swimmers with open arms (9).

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DAVID LIVINGSTON/
GETTY IMAGES
(1); DAMIAN
DOVARGANES/AP (2,
7); GDA/EL NUEVO
DIA/PUERTO RICO
(3); DIEGO AZUBEL/
EPA (4, 5); RICH
FURY/INVISION/
AP (6); ANDREW D.
BERNSTEIN (8, 9)



1



7



2



3



4



5



6



8



9

INBOX

FOR JULY 27, 2015

It's hard watching **Tiger's** game deteriorate (POINT AFTER), but it was almost predictable. Golf is a game of consistency and repetition. He's been through nearly half a dozen swing coaches since his professional debut in 1996, each of whom has changed his swing.

Jack Cipoletti
Charleston, W.Va.



I think your article on the British Open did a disservice to **Zach Johnson**, the actual winner. The story should have focused on what Johnson did to win, not on what Jordan Spieth failed to do.

Thomas E. Carr, Santa Fe

We all would have loved to have seen Spieth pull off the triple by winning his third major of the season. However, having a stand-up guy like Johnson grind out a victory in an exciting playoff was a great substitute.

Carl Buice, Macon, Ga.



While **Rex Chapman's** drug addiction is tragic, nine thefts, with convenient memory loss after each one, and all from the same Apple store, smells of rotten apples.

David J. Gross, St. Augustine, Fla.



I commend Seth Davis for his story about Chapman's journey from decorated hoops star to struggling addict. He did a tremendous job detailing both Chapman's glory days and his pitfalls.

J.W. Walker, Aledo, Texas



COVER

When I saw your **Darrelle Revis** cover, I immediately recognized the layout from the original, and I pulled out my copy of it with **Joe Namath** from 1965. I was only six at the time, but I was already a fan of SI. Glad I kept my copy!

Ron Jorgensen, Tucson



PAGE 16

SCORECARD

While I'm not that familiar with *Madden NFL 2004*, I don't buy your declaration that the game's cover boy, **Michael Vick**, is the most dominant sports video game character of all time. Anyone who grew up in the original Nintendo era knows that **Bo Jackson** in *Tecmo Super Bowl* was an automatic touchdown.

Jordy Dykstra, San Diego

CONTACT
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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AND YOU COULD SAVE A BUNDLE.
I THINK THAT'S A HAIKU.**



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SCORECARD

Here's The Deal

Lessons learned from a frenzied major league trade deadline

BY JOE SHEEHAN

1

IT'S A NEW ERA

By the craziest trade deadline in memory every team had made at least one transaction, from the Blue Jays (acquiring All-Stars David Price and **Troy Tulowitzki**) down to the Diamondbacks (sending middle reliever J.C. Ramirez to the Mariners). The biggest

moves had a winter-meetings, blockbuster feel. Toronto sent three prospects and All-Star shortstop Jose Reyes to the Rockies for Tulowitzki. The Rangers and the Phillies assembled an eight-player monster to get ace Cole Hamels to Texas. And the Dodgers, Braves and Marlins concocted

a 13-player trade that took two days to complete, cost Los Angeles \$40 million and may have involved a two-picture deal at Sony.

The biggest players turned out to be three teams that have operated on the fringes for a while: Toronto, Kansas City and Houston. The Jays haven't made the playoffs in 21 years, the longest active streak in MLB; they're also the only team that has never appeared in the Division Series. They inherited the postseason-drought mantle from

The Swing of Queens

The Mets' roller-coaster ride through deadline week

July 28

Reliever Jenry Mejia tests positive for PEDs for second time this season, is suspended 162 games.

July 29

News breaks that infielder **Wilmer Flores** and pitcher Zack Wheeler will be traded to the Brewers for outfielder Carlos Gomez. Flores tears up in the Citi Field infield, in full view of TV cameras.



the Royals, who made the playoffs last year for the first time since 1985, when they last won a division title. The Astros, of course, were the industry's point-and-laugh team as recently as last summer, when they failed to sign the first pick in the draft.

That trio dominated the days before the July 31 deadline. After landing Tulowitzki, the Jays upgraded their rotation by sending three lefthanders, including top prospect Daniel Norris, to Detroit for Price. There's little—if any—precedent for any team adding a pair like this, two of the top 25 talents in baseball, at the deadline. The Royals picked up a No. 1 starter from the Reds in Johnny Cueto and then added the high-OBP element they desperately needed in utilityman Ben Zobrist. The Astros bolstered their rotation by getting lefthander Scott Kazmir from Oakland, then addressed their defense and the top of their lineup in a deal with Milwaukee for Carlos Gomez.

As these low-profile



teams were making bold moves, many big-city clubs nibbled at the edges. The Yankees, Angels, Cubs and White Sox made minor deals. The Tigers and the Phillies sold off talent. The Red Sox mostly sat around.

In the two decades since the strike, baseball has been played not so much in cities as in markets. Your market size was your destiny, your potential success defined by your Opening Day payroll, your hope and faith boxed in by your EBITDA. Last week was a rebuke to that idea. A decade of massive revenue growth, increased revenue sharing and a lowered percentage of that money going to players has changed what's possible for every team.

2 SOMETIMES MONEY STILL TALKS

Not every big-market team sat on the sideline: The Dodgers continued to use their cash reserves. A month that began with L.A. blowing through its international-signing pool—spending more than 10 times its allotted amount to acquire foreign amateurs—ended with the team effectively buying young talent from the Braves and old talent from the Marlins for \$40 million. The Dodgers' complicated three-team trade netted two strong starting pitchers, Alex Wood and **Mat Latos**, plus infielder Jose Peraza, a top 50 prospect from Atlanta's system. Miami got little more than payroll savings of about \$14 million. The Braves got Hector Olivera, a 30-year-old Cuban infielder,

for just \$31 million over five years; the Dodgers are eating his \$28 million signing bonus. It's an audacious play by L.A., which has found new ways to leverage its financial advantage.

3 THE METS ARE STILL STRAPPED

Across the country the Mets were the anti-Dodgers, also sharing a huge market but acting as if they were the Willets Point Marlins. New York, which has been loath to spend since the Wilpon family was victimized in the Bernie Madoff financial scandal, made three deals in which it added four veterans at a payroll addition of just \$8.5 million in 2015 with no obligations beyond that. The Mets overpaid in prospects—including fast-rising pitchers Casey Meisner (to the A's for reliever Tyler Clippard) and Michael Fulmer (to Detroit for outfielder Yoenis Cespedes)—rather than take on money. Given an insurance payout of around \$4 million for injured third baseman David Wright's deal and reliever Jennry Mejia's two unpaid PED suspensions, New York has committed just

July 29

After the game—a 7-3 loss to the Padres—GM Sandy Alderson says there is no Brewers deal, excoriates social media.

July 30

Mets blow a six-run lead and fall 8-7 to San Diego.

July 31

Alderson makes a trade—this time for real—to get slugger **Yoenis Cespedes** from the Tigers. Flores celebrates with a 12th-inning walk-off homer to beat the Nationals.

Aug. 2

Mets sweep the Nats to tie them atop the NL East, New York's first day in top spot since June 19.



\$2.5 million in additional money this season—or about what the Dodgers spent on catering their trade-deadline war room. Despite being tied with the Nationals for first place in the NL East at week's end, the Mets and their continuing lack of resources are an embarrassment to the industry.

4 OPPORTUNITIES KNOCK

Most of the deadline deals created chances for young players, whether with their new organizations or because veterans roster-blocking them were dealt away. With outfielder Shane Victorino gone (to the Angels), the Red Sox' Rusney Castillo will finally get a clean shot in Fenway's spacious rightfield. Lefty John Lamb, part of the haul received from Kansas City for Cueto, should be in the Reds' rotation this month. Aaron Brooks, a 25-year-old righthander acquired by the A's for Zobrist,



started for Oakland and won over the weekend. In Milwaukee, Domingo Santana, 23, could win **Carlos Gomez's** old outfield spot. And the trades of closers Jonathan Papelbon and Joakim Soria mean save chances for Ken Giles (in Philadelphia) and Bruce Rondon (in Detroit).

5

THE DEALING ISN'T DONE

The end of July doesn't mean the end of action: Players who clear waivers in August can be traded anywhere, and those claimed on waivers can be dealt to the team that claims them. The first group will likely include players on big contracts, such as Padres starter **James Shields**, the Rockies' Reyes and outfielder Carlos Gonzalez, and Brewers starters Kyle Lohse and Matt Garza. The second will include impending free agents such as Rangers starter Yovani Gallardo, Padres outfielder Justin Upton and Phillies second baseman Chase Utley. There are likely to be plenty of transactions before the end of the month, particularly when teams like the Padres, Rangers and White Sox get a dose of reality and realize they're out of the races. □

GO FIGURE

111

Players who were traded in the nine days leading up to the July 31 trade deadline.

74

Pitchers among the 112 players dealt.

11



Franchises that **LaTroy Hawkins** has played for in his 21-year career; the reliever added another to the list when he was traded from the Rockies to the Blue Jays.



The Heart of the Order

Theo Schell-Lambert
An injured big leaguer reflects on the game, life. Swings for an astute insider's view; reads like a couch potato's musings.
#twobagger



Hangman's Game

Bill Syken
A pro football murder mystery complete with tight plotting, ample suspense, a touch of the tawdry and wry humor.
#punter



Hit Count

Chris Lynch
Head-injury debate becomes real life for teen baller. The action and sharp writing overcome a few malapropisms.
#seniorscantplayjv



Racing the Rain

John L. Parker
Space-race era coming-of-age track story—last of a popular trilogy—starts strong and has a big kick but tires a bit in the middle.
#miler



BOOKS

TWEETABLE
REVIEWS



have KINDLE will TRAVEL

@KDKUIPER, BANGKOK | Amazon asked if I'd bring the Kindle Paperwhite on my trip to Thailand. After wandering the crowded streets of Bangkok, I found my way to the floating market on the Chao Phraya river and got lost in the Sonchai Jitpleecheep series.

Follow more journeys on Instagram @AMAZONKINDLE

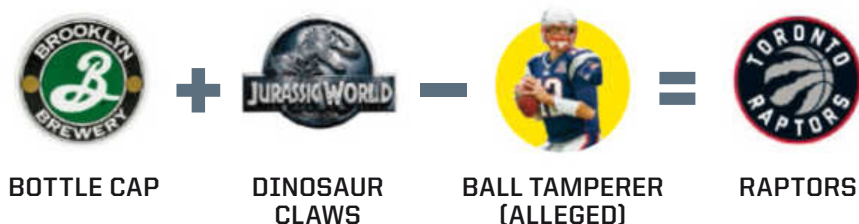
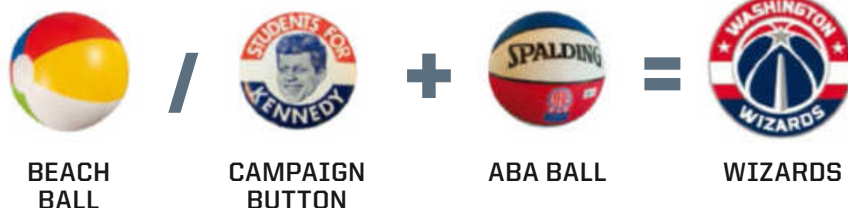


kindle

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Logo Math

The pluses and minuses of the new NBA logos



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

A Lansing taxidermist built a Michigan-Michigan State football tableau out of 22 dead chipmunks.



THEY SAID IT

"I DON'T LIKE THE WORD RESTORE, BECAUSE RESTORE MAKES IT SEEM LIKE IT WENT TO CRAP AND DILAPIDATED, AND SOME HIPSTERS WENT AND BOUGHT IT AND NEEDED TO LIVE IN IT AS AN INVESTMENT AND [ARE] TRYING TO FLIP IT RIGHT NOW. AND THAT'S NOT WHAT IT IS."

Joshua Perry

Ohio State linebacker, after being asked if new Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh would be able to restore the OSU-Michigan rivalry.



Hippies

Those mellow grunts of joy you heard coming from the quad? The International Olympic Committee officially recognized ultimate Frisbee, dude!



Grumpy Old(ish) Men

After Chelsea lost to Arsenal in the Community Shield, petulant Blues boss Jose Mourinho chucked his runner-up medal into the crowd.



JUBLIA®

(efinaconazole)
Topical Solution 10%

TOENAIL FUNGUS?

— DON'T HIDE IT —
★ SMASH IT ★
WITH JUBLIA

Individual results may vary.



NEW
8 mL
Rx Only



JUBLIA is an FDA-approved prescription topical solution used to treat toenail fungus (onychomycosis).

JUBLIA is specifically formulated to reach the site of onychomycosis and fight the fungus that can live beneath the toenail — allowing some patients to have clearer toenails grow back. It's time to smash toenail fungus.

Ask your doctor if JUBLIA is right for you and visit JubliaRx.com

Indication

JUBLIA (efinaconazole) Topical Solution, 10% is a prescription medicine used to treat fungal infections of the toenails.

Important Safety Information

- JUBLIA is for use on nails and surrounding skin only. Do not use JUBLIA in your mouth, eyes, or vagina. Use it exactly as instructed by your doctor.
- It is not known whether JUBLIA is effective in children.
- Before you use JUBLIA, tell your doctor about all your medical conditions, including if you are or plan to become pregnant, are breastfeeding, or plan to breastfeed, because it is not known whether JUBLIA can harm an unborn fetus or nursing infant. Tell your doctor about all medications you are taking, and whether you have any other nail infections.

- JUBLIA is flammable. Avoid heat and flame while applying JUBLIA to your toenail.
- JUBLIA may cause irritation at the treated site. The most common side effects include: ingrown toenail, redness, itching, swelling, burning or stinging, blisters, and pain. Tell your doctor about any side effects that bother you or do not go away.

You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit www.fda.gov/medwatch or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

Please see Patient Information for JUBLIA on next page.



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PATIENT INFORMATION

JUBLIA (joo-blee-uh)

(efinaconazole) Topical Solution, 10%

This Patient Information does not include all the information needed to use JUBLIA safely and effectively. Please see full Prescribing Information.

Important information: JUBLIA is for use on toenails and surrounding skin only. Do not use JUBLIA in your mouth, eyes, or vagina.

What is JUBLIA?

JUBLIA is a prescription medicine used to treat fungal infections of the toenails. It is not known if JUBLIA is safe and effective in children.

What should I tell my healthcare provider before using JUBLIA?

Before you use JUBLIA, tell your healthcare provider about all your medical conditions, including if you:

- are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. It is not known if JUBLIA can harm your unborn baby.
- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if JUBLIA passes into your breast milk.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

How should I use JUBLIA?

See the “Instructions for Use” at the end of this Patient Information leaflet for detailed information about the right way to use JUBLIA.

- Use JUBLIA exactly as your healthcare provider tells you to use it. Apply JUBLIA to your affected toenails 1 time each day. Wait for at least 10 minutes after showering, bathing, or washing before applying JUBLIA. JUBLIA is used for 48 weeks.
- It is not known if the use of nail polish or other cosmetic nail products (such as gel nails or acrylic nails) will affect how JUBLIA works.

What should I avoid while using JUBLIA?

- JUBLIA is flammable. Avoid heat and flame while applying JUBLIA to your toenail.

What are the possible side effects of JUBLIA?

JUBLIA may cause irritation at the treated site. The most common side effects include: ingrown toenail, redness, itching, swelling, burning or stinging, blisters, and pain. Tell your healthcare provider if you have any side effects that bother you or that does not go away.

These are not all the possible side effects of JUBLIA.

Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to the FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

How should I store JUBLIA?

- Store JUBLIA at room temperature, between 68°F to 77°F (20°C to 25°C). Do not freeze JUBLIA.
- Keep the bottle tightly closed and store in an upright position.
- JUBLIA is flammable. Keep away from heat and flame.

Keep JUBLIA and all medicines out of the reach of children.

General information about the safe and effective use of JUBLIA

Medicines are sometimes prescribed for purposes other than those listed in a Patient Information leaflet. You can ask your pharmacist or healthcare provider for information about JUBLIA that is written for health professionals. Do not use JUBLIA for a condition for which it was not prescribed. Do not give JUBLIA to other people, even if they have the same condition you have. It may harm them.

What are the ingredients in JUBLIA?

Active ingredients: efinaconazole

Inactive ingredients: alcohol, anhydrous citric acid, butylated hydroxytoluene, C12-15 alkyl lactate, cyclomethicone, diisopropyl adipate, disodium edetate, and purified water.

Manufactured for: Valeant Pharmaceuticals North America LLC, Bridgewater, NJ 08807 USA

Manufactured by: Kaken Pharmaceutical Co. Ltd, Shizuoka, Japan. Product of Japan

For more information, call 1-800-321-4576.

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**Tyrese Cooper** | *Miami Gardens, Fla.* | *Track*

Tyrese, a freshman at American Senior High in the fall, set a national 15–16 age-group record at the Junior Olympics in Jacksonville, with a 20.98 in the 200 meters, the 11th-best high school time in the nation this year. At the Florida middle school championships in May, he set meet marks in the 100 [10.61], 200 [21.26] and 400 [47.76].

**Olivia Quigley** | *Brookfield, Wis.* | *Track*

Quigley, 24, who has autism and was diagnosed with Stage IV breast cancer in February, won the 100 meters [16.76] at the Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles. She also earned gold in the 4 × 100 and silver in the 200 [36.05]. Quigley, a nutrition assistant at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, scheduled her treatment around the Games.

**Nick McLaughlin** | *New Castle, N.H.* | *Golf*

McLaughlin, a senior at UVa this year, won the Massachusetts Amateur final, 4 and 3 over Patrick Frodigh, at Oak Hill Country Club in Fitchburg. A week later he shot a seven-under 281 to win the New England Amateur by one stroke at Baker Hill Golf Club in Newbury, N.H. He is only the fourth golfer in 86 years to take both titles in the same summer.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by ALEXANDRA FENWICK

**Asia Seidt** | *Louisville* | *Swimming*

Asia, a rising senior at Sacred Heart Academy, broke National Club Swimming Association records in the 200-meter backstroke [2:11.96] and 50 fly [27.59] at the NCSA long-course junior nationals in Orlando. Asia also won the 200 fly [2:13.36]. At the state meet in February, she won the 100-yard back [53.44].

**Warren Prehmus** | *Atlanta* | *Basketball*

Prehmus, a 59-year-old financial adviser, led the Georgia Boys to the 55-and-over gold medal, 64–51 in overtime against Delaware Gold at the National Senior Games Association three-on-three tournament, in St. Paul, Minn. A point guard, he averaged 25.0 points over nine games, including 29 points in the title game.

**Stephanie Houck, Camille White** | *Annapolis, Md.* | *Sailing*

Stephanie, a junior skipper at the Severn School in Severna Park, Md., and Camille, a sophomore there, became the first girls' team to win the Club 420 national championship, on Narragansett Bay in Newport. In June they took the junior women's doublehanded title on Lake Murray in Columbia, S.C.



TRIBUTE

Roddy Piper 1954–2015

■ IN A 1985 cover story on pro wrestling, *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* called Rowdy Roddy Piper, with a degree of awe, “the most contemptible of all wrestling heels.” Last week, at 61, Piper—born Roderick Toombs—died of cardiac arrest.

Piper—whose “Piper’s Pit” segments on broadcasts ranked with *Late Night with David Letterman* as the best, most subversive talk shows of the 1980s—was unsurpassed when it came to dispensing tough-guy lines. Among his best: “I do exactly what I want to do. You say I’m insane. I say thank you very much.” And from 1988’s sci-fi horror flick *They Live*, “I have come here to chew bubble gum and kick ass. And I’m all out of bubble gum.”

—Richard Deitsch

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To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to SI.com/faces. For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow [@SI_Faces](https://twitter.com/SI_Faces) on Twitter.



JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: *The Pacers are going to wear [replicas] of the Hickory uniforms to honor the movie Hoosiers. Will you wear one?*

LARRY BIRD: I couldn't fit into any uniform right now.

DP: How small was your high school [Springs Valley High, in French Lick, Ind.]?

LB: One of the smallest in the state. Back in the day we didn't have class basketball. The dream was to be good enough to play against the big schools. That's what we tried to do. But unfortunately I played with a kid who kept missing free throws at the end of the game, and we didn't get there.

DP: *You're not over it, are you?*

LB: Never. [It was] a big loss. I was at a party about two years ago, and this lady in her 70s looked at my friend and said, "What are you doing here? After missing those free throws back in '74, you shouldn't even show your face."

DP: *Could you have gone pro out of high school?*

LB: No, I don't think so. When I was 18, it was a little different. Kids [today] are more mature. Their bodies are filled out. They're ready for the challenge. There's no way I could have come out at 18 or 19.

DP: *Did you see Shaquille O'Neal and Scottie Pippen arguing about who would*



LARRY BIRD

STRAIGHT SHOOTER

The Celtics legend and current Pacers president of basketball operations has never been one to mince words, and he's still calling it like he sees it.

win between the all-time Lakers and Bulls?

LB: No, but who really cares? Do people really care about that?

DP: *They like to argue about it.*

LB: It's according to what era you're from. People from the '80s think that was the best time for basketball.

DP: *Why is there a fascination with basketball from that era?*

LB: Most of the big stars came out then. I always thought our '86 team. . . . How can you get any team better than that?

DP: *Michael Jordan said he could beat anybody on his Bobcats roster.*

LB: [Laughs.] Now?

DP: Yes.

LB: Oh, jeez, c'mon. He'd have to prove that to me. Man, they gotta let this stuff go. That's like you saying you could beat me in one-on-one.

DP: *I could score on you.*

LB: Anybody can score on me. That's been proven.

DP: *If we played to 21, what would the result be?*

LB: I'm not playing to 21.

DP: *O.K., 10.*

LB: I hate to say this, it'd probably be 10–8. Because I'd have to sit down and take a break when you have the ball.

DP: *Could you take Jordan right now?*

LB: I hate to admit this, but he'd kill me [laughs].

DP: *I don't know if I believe that.*

LB: I'm 40 pounds more now than when I played. I'm broken down. I really don't care like I used to. I don't have the fight I once had. But it'd be a pretty close game. □

GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



Blue Jays pitcher **David Price** said being

dealt from Detroit to Toronto last week wasn't nearly as dramatic as his 2014 trade from the Rays to the Tigers. "Last year there was still a lot of doubt as to whether I was going to be traded," Price said. "It went up to the final hour. This time, I knew." . . . UCLA football coach **Jim Mora** was on the



opposite sideline from Eagles

coach Chip Kelly while Kelly was at Oregon and says he doesn't buy claims that Kelly has issues with black players. Said Mora, "He wouldn't have become the recruiter he was and had the success if he couldn't relate to all races, ages and socioeconomic backgrounds." . . . I asked NASCAR driver **Matt Kenseth** if he



would let his three daughters

race. "I'm going to discourage the girls," Kenseth said. "I just think there are other things they could be doing."



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The Case for . . . L.A. To Dodge It

BY S.L. PRICE

IN 1972, WHEN Dick Lamm, then a Colorado state legislator, CPA and self-described Olympics lover, challenged Denver's winning bid for the 1976 Winter Games, it seemed only logical. "They had overestimated their revenues and underestimated their expenses," he says of the organizing committee. Cue the outrage: *How dare you?*

"All I started doing was asking questions," says Lamm, who went on to serve three terms as the state's governor. "You'd think I was pissing on the flag."

Today? Someone would throw a parade in his honor—cost-effectively. Though no other city has given back an Olympics—after 60% of Coloradans voted in 1972 to outlaw the use of state funds for the Olympics, the '76 Games went to Innsbruck, Austria—Lamm became godfather of

a movement that has all but obliterated the International Olympic Committee's last molecules of mystique. Indeed, the combination of Boston's bid for the 2024 Summer Games, which was aborted on July 27, and Beijing's being awarded the 2022 Winter Olympics last Friday reinforced a sense that the "Olympic movement" may be running out of road.

It was painful to watch the spin from Kuala Lumpur, site of the IOC meeting, with references to Beijing's "historic" election as the first city to host a Summer and a Winter Games. Going back to China, amid its ongoing crackdown on dissent, only emphasized the IOC's few options. The only other bidder, Almaty, Kazakhstan, another corrupt autocracy, could hardly deliver China's efficiency and revenue.

Still, if the IOC finds itself snuggling with dodgy bedmates—Vlad Putin and his \$51 billion Sochi Olympics?—it has only itself to blame. Despite the IOC's recent stabs at reform, and optimism surrounding Tokyo's 2020 Games, decades of budget bloat and a long line of debt-ridden hosts have

+
Decades of budget bloat and a long line of debt-ridden hosts have made it fashionable to dismiss the Olympics.

made it fashionable to dismiss the Olympics as more trouble than they're worth. Krakow, Munich, Oslo, Stockholm and Switzerland all passed on 2022 bids. Lviv, Ukraine, pulled out after the Russian invasion.

So it should have come as no shock that a protest group, No Boston Olympics, could galvanize public opinion against the city's \$8.6 billion bid for the 2024 Games. But the end to Boston's campaign left the USOC scrambling to gin up another candidate by the IOC's Sept. 15 deadline, and momentum is building to offer up Los Angeles—ready, willing and able. But L.A. should wait.

It has been two decades since the U.S. hosted a Summer Games (Atlanta in 1996). Since then, anti-American sentiment within the IOC, spurred by U.S. foreign policy and broadcast-rights disputes, helped torpedo bids by New York 2012 and Chicago 2016. USOC chairman Larry Probst has since "done a tremendous job of mending fences," says former IOC and USOC member Bob Ctvrtlik. "But if the time isn't right and we don't have the right city and the right leadership? It's better not to bid than to bid with someone you don't think can win."

Retired from Olympic administration, with no claim on the L.A. bid or IOC thinking, Ctvrtlik rightly believes that a third SoCal Olympics would be "fabulous." But a formidable Paris leads the pack for 2024, followed by Rome, Hamburg and Budapest. Another U.S. failure could demoralize American efforts for a generation.

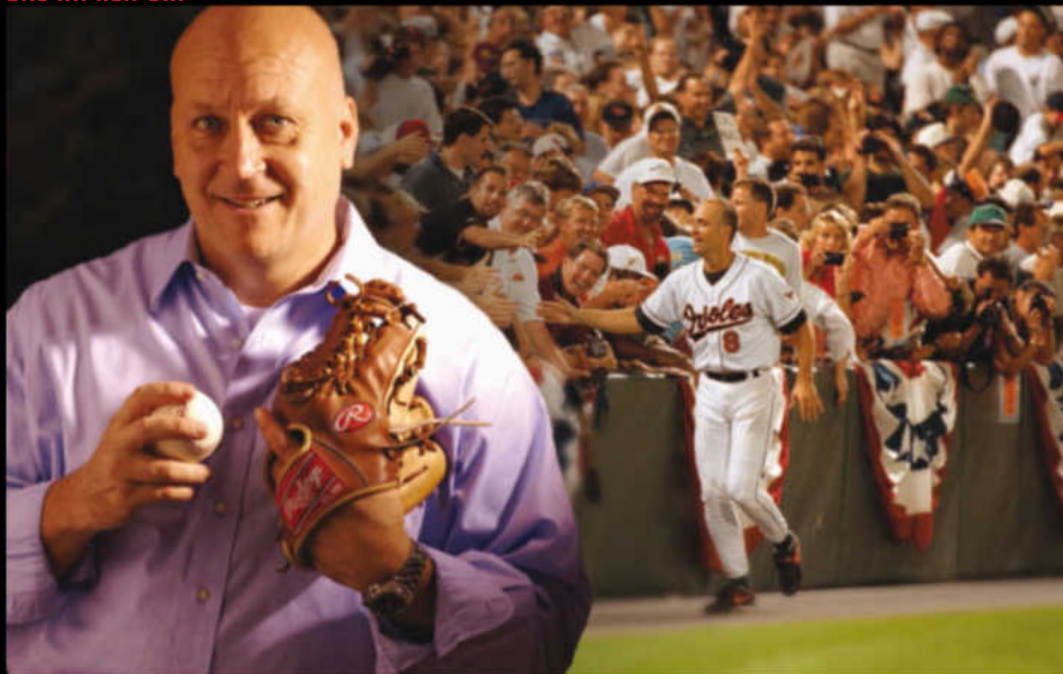
Let L.A.'s bid breathe. Learn from Boston's reversal. Wait for 2028 and give IOC members four more years to see: They need the U.S. more than the U.S. needs them. □

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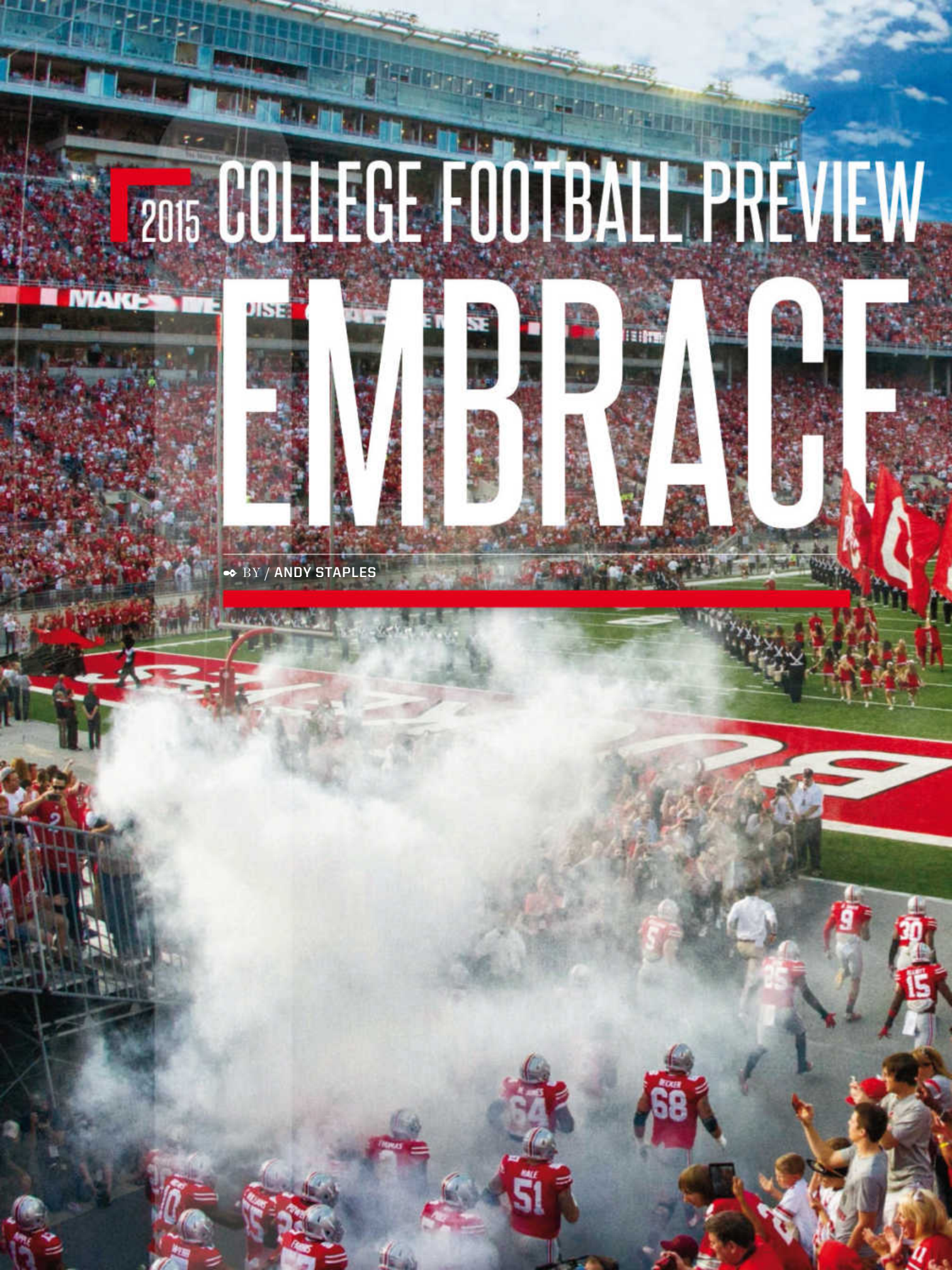
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2015

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW

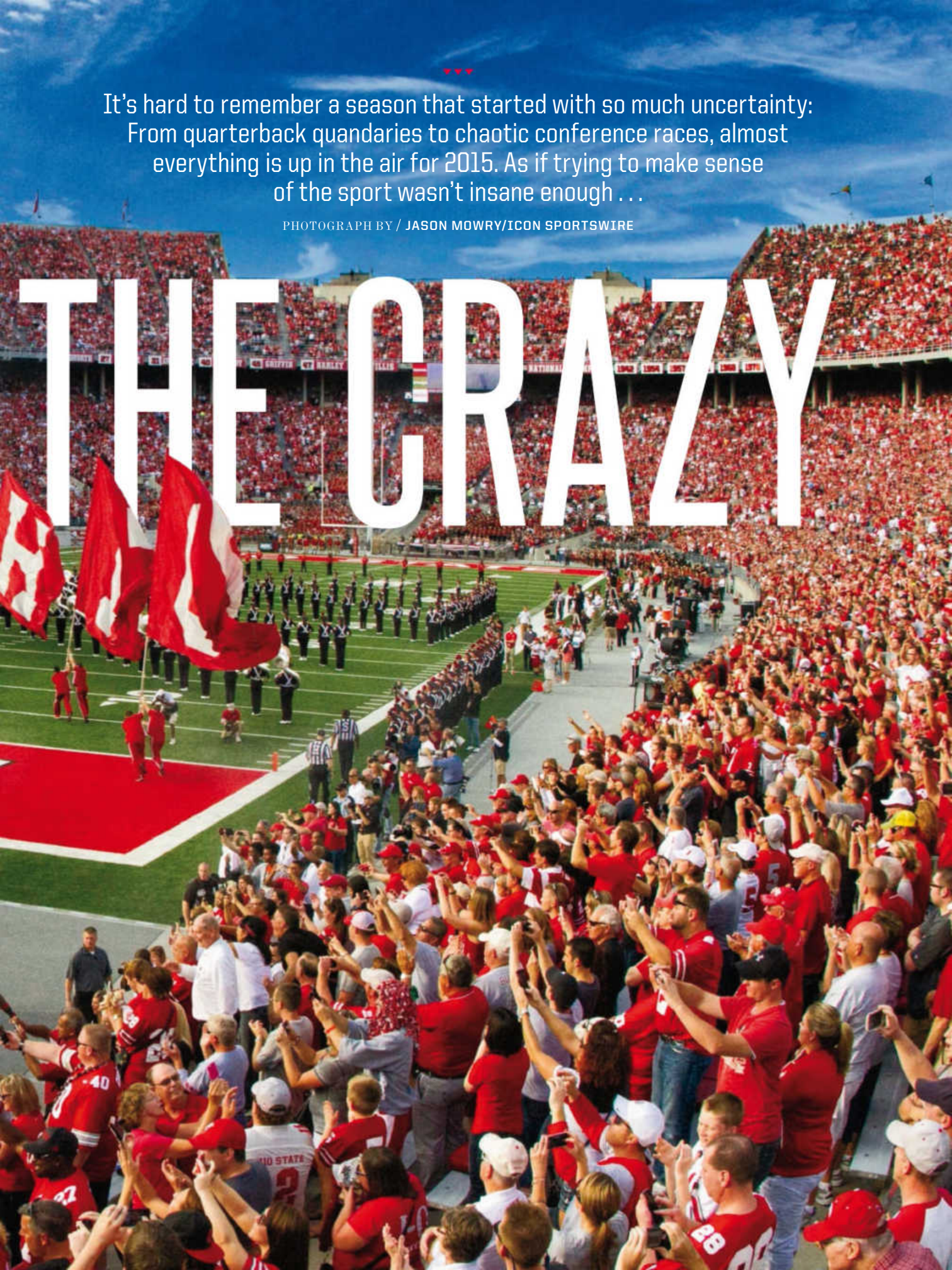
EMBRACE

BY / ANDY STAPLES

It's hard to remember a season that started with so much uncertainty:
From quarterback quandaries to chaotic conference races, almost
everything is up in the air for 2015. As if trying to make sense
of the sport wasn't insane enough . . .

PHOTOGRAPH BY / JASON MOWRY/ICON SPORTSWIRE

THE CRAZY

A high-angle, wide shot of a football stadium during a game. The stands are packed with fans, many wearing red and white. In the foreground, fans are cheering and holding up phones. On the field, a marching band in dark uniforms is lined up, and several large red and white flags are being carried. The sky is blue with some clouds.

S

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED has made some regrettable choices at the top of its preseason college football rankings. In 1985 we picked Washington to win the national title. The Huskies went 7-5. In '94 we thought most highly of Arizona and its Desert Swarm defense. The Wildcats finished 8-4. In 2001 we identified Oregon State as the national-champ-to-be, even though we were also aware that Miami was fielding a football team. The Beavers lost their opener to Fresno State and stumbled to a 5-6 record. These are the

most egregious picks, but misses are not unusual. We've correctly identified the national champ only four times since 1985. What can we say? The future performance of large groups of 18-to-22-year-old males is generally tough to predict.

But last year, when we got to pick four playoff teams for the first time and not just one national champion, we acquitted ourselves quite well. We had three playoff participants (Florida State, Alabama and Ohio State) in our preseason top four, and we picked the eventual national champion Buckeyes for the same spot (No. 4) that the Playoff Selection Committee placed them in last December. Batting .750 isn't bad, especially considering our checkered past.

Unfortunately we're probably not going to repeat that performance this year. In 2015 no one knows anything.

It's difficult to remember a season that opened with this much uncertainty. There is one obvious national-title contender: Ohio State remains loaded, and the Buckeyes could be even better than they were last season. Yet even they have a massive question mark standing five yards behind center Jacoby Boren. Who will start at quarterback? Sophomore J.T. Barrett, who in his first 12 games as a starter set the Big Ten record for total touchdowns in a season (45) before going down with a broken ankle? Or will it be junior Cardale Jones, who went 3-0 as a starter in Ohio State's highest-stakes games—postseason wins against Wisconsin, Alabama and Oregon? The decision would have been even tougher had senior Braxton Miller—whose 2014 right-shoulder injury opened the door for Barrett and Jones—not decided to move to

H-back. That's how weird this season is. The guy who won the 2012 and '13 Big Ten offensive player of the year award as Ohio State's quarterback isn't even in the mix to start at that position in Columbus in 2015.

Who else will compete for playoff spots? Who knows? Baylor and TCU just missed the tournament last year, and each team brings back almost everyone who helped produce 11-win regular seasons. Ala-

bama lost the Sugar Bowl as a No. 1 seed last season and will field the best defensive front seven in college football, but for the second consecutive season the Crimson Tide will open camp with a quarterback competition. Of course, if Auburn's new starting quarterback, Jeremy Johnson, is as spe-



▼▼▼
**KNOWN
KNOWN**
Jones, Barrett
and Miller
(above, left
to right) are
down to a
two-man race,
while Bama's
defensive line
(right) and
the battle
for the Big 12
(opposite) will
be crazy good.



cial as coach Gus Malzahn has hinted, and the hiring of coordinator Will Muschamp shores up the Tigers' defense, Alabama might not even be the best team in its own state. Oregon hasn't picked a quarterback yet, and one candidate (Eastern Washington graduate transfer Vernon Adams) won't even be with the Ducks when they start camp, as he finishes up course work on his EWU degree. (He's expected to arrive three days after practice starts.) The Pac-12 South could produce a playoff team, but the identity of that team is anyone's guess. With the exception of Colorado, every team in the division looks capable of beating everyone else and winning that side of the league. Over in the ACC, Clemson has a capable quarterback



**IN THE SEC WEST THE ONLY CERTAINTY IS THIS:
A COACH WHO MAKES AT LEAST \$4 MILLION
A YEAR WILL FINISH SEVENTH, AND A
FAN BASE WILL ASK ITS ATHLETIC DIRECTOR
WHY HE PAID SO MUCH TO FINISH LAST.**

in sophomore DeShaun Watson, but four members of a ferocious 2014 front seven departed in the NFL draft. Who will replace those guys?

Last month 30-year-old Texas A&M offensive coordinator Jake Spavital said something that suggests he has an old coach's soul. "A lot of these teams are so close talentwise," he said, "it really comes down to chemistry." Spavital works in the tightest division in the country, the SEC West: A reasonable argument can be made for each of the seven teams to win the division. A reasonable argument can also be made that five of those teams—Alabama and Auburn are the outliers—could finish seventh. The only certainty is this: A coach who makes at least \$4 million a year (as every coach in the division does) will finish seventh, and a fan base will ask its athletic director why the school paid so much to finish dead last.

The rest, as Spavital noted, will come down to chemistry. We have a general sense of the (excellent) chemistry at Ohio State, Baylor and TCU because those teams have so many key contributors returning, but other teams remain unknown to us and probably to their coaches. The chemistry on many teams doesn't become evident until the players face adversity together. That won't happen until the games begin.

Many teams will be overrated or underrated this preseason because of their bowl performances at the end of last season. SI's writers and editors fell into this trap in the case of each terrible pick described above. The 1984 Washington team ended its season by beating Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl 28–17. The 1993 Arizona and 2000 Oregon State teams ended their seasons by dominating in the Fiesta Bowl. The only thing less reliable than predicting the future performance of large groups of 18-to-22-year-old males is basing that prediction on the performance of a slightly different group in an exhibition game about which one or both teams may or may not have cared. Tennessee's 45–28 TaxSlayer Bowl annihilation of Iowa last January could suggest the young Volunteers are ready to compete for an SEC East title ... or that they simply had a good day in Jacksonville. Oklahoma, meanwhile, got bashed by Clemson 40–6 in the Russell Athletic Bowl. That doesn't mean the Sooners and their revamped offense won't factor into this season's Big 12 or playoff race, especially considering TCU must play in Norman six days before it hosts Baylor on Black Friday.

So much can happen between now and then, and even at that point in late November, the selection committee may still have no idea which teams will make the playoff. Remember how TCU sat at No. 3, three spots ahead of the Baylor team that had beaten the Horned Frogs, with one week of games remaining? Remember a few days later when the committee finally (correctly) put the winner of the head-to-head matchup in front? Remember when the committee then left both of those teams out of the bracket? That shift caused a brief existential crisis in the championship-game-free Big 12, which might have gotten two teams into the playoff had things broken a little differently on Dec. 6.

The fact is we don't know who will start at quarterback for Ohio State, what the committee will do, who will make the playoff. That's what makes this season so damn exciting. It could get crazy. Let's embrace it. □



BEING DAK



◆ BY / **PETE THAMEL** • PHOTOGRAPHS BY / **MICHAEL MULVEY** FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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After a breakout season in which he led Mississippi State on a wild run to No. 1, quarterback Dak Prescott found himself badly beaten on spring break and shadowed on social media. There's a high price for being a star in the SEC

O

IN A WARM Wednesday in April, the ping of aluminum bats echoes through the sleepy evening in Starkville. The Mississippi State women's softball team is playing, and in the bleachers at the cozy stadium professors grade papers between pitches while sorority girls in yoga pants tap on their laptops.

The Bulldogs' All-SEC quarterback, senior Dak Prescott, stands behind the outfield fence, his left shoulder wedged against the rightfield foul pole. Backup quarterback Damian Williams, a junior, covers Prescott's other side, creating

a protective pocket. An inning after arriving, Prescott senses a crowd forming near him and knows what's going to happen next. In the throaty whisper of a *National Geographic* narrator, he relates the scene of predators moving in for the kill.

"They're gaining confidence," he says, as the fans ease his way. "They're getting closer." A pause. "They're either going to say, 'I'm sorry, I know you get this a lot but' or, 'I hate to bother you but. . .'"

The students, mostly female, buy time and build courage by refreshing Facebook and staring with practiced nonchalance at their phones. But before anyone musters the nerve to ask Prescott for a picture, the pack retreats. "Don't worry, they'll be back," Prescott says. "They're just going to find their outgoing friend."

Minutes later freshman Kaela Stevens emerges from another group of girls and pokes the 6' 2", 230-pound Prescott in the ribs. "Hey, I know this is awkward, but I'm the girl that's been stalking you on Instagram," she says. With a laugh and a smile, Prescott happily signs a football for the husband of Stevens's boss, a quest Stevens began in the comment section of a Prescott Instagram post. "When I say that I go to State," she says, giggling, "people immediately say, 'Do you know Dak?'"

By now, we all know Dak. He led the Bulldogs to the No. 1 ranking for five weeks in 2014 and transformed their hometown from an SEC punchline to a destination: Starkvegas. But with Prescott's success came life in the viewfinder of a cellphone camera lens (aka the fishbowl). Suddenly, he is the biggest thing in his remote college town—MSU's student body (20,000) nearly matches Starkville's population (24,000)—and a target of public attention almost everywhere else he goes.

This spring Prescott took only online classes and



▼▼▼
**PRINT,
PASS AND
POSE**
After
completing
20 of 29
throws for
231 yards
and three
TDs in the
spring game,
Prescott
took time to
connect with
the fans.

started calling his barber for 9 p.m. haircuts. His two older brothers sign autographs for fans. Prescott carefully avoids complaining about his new normal, but it's clear the life of a modern SEC star is more than touchdowns and standing ovations. "I wouldn't trade it for anything," he says, then pauses to reconsider. "I guess. I don't know. That's a hard question. I guess I just want to be able to go to Walmart and not be bothered."

PRESCOTT'S OFF-CAMPUS apartment is a ramshackle two-bedroom he pays \$290 a month to share with Gus Walley, a junior tight end. Decorations include a *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* shower curtain and the head of an eight-point buck that Walley shot, the antlers of which hold his hat collection. While Prescott spends a lot more time at home than he used to, he's not wired for endless games of *Call of Duty*.

That means he is constantly searching for ways to be present but separate, social but guarded, to blend into a crowd without attracting one. He loves attending MSU sporting events, but he doesn't get there too early and often needs teammates to clear an exit through swarming crowds. Prescott abandoned eating in the student union after a trip to Panda Express this fall required Jason Bourne–like escape tactics.

He does still make the occasional trip out with his teammates, usually to Rick's Café, a cavernous off-campus bar that humbly refers to itself as "Probably the best bar in the world." But discretion is necessary once Prescott steps in the door. "Maybe I can go to a bar and get sloppy drunk and have to get carried out," says Williams. "But Dak, it's a whole



MINUTES LATER A FRESHMAN EMERGES FROM ANOTHER PACK OF GIRLS AND POKES PRESCOTT IN THE RIBS. "HEY, I KNOW THIS IS AWKWARD, BUT I'M THE GIRL WHO'S BEEN STALKING YOU ON INSTAGRAM," SHE SAYS.

different story. It's blowing up on a bigger stage."

Prescott has 47,600 Twitter followers, 63,600 Instagram followers and countless tweets breathlessly tracking his movements. Students pretend to text as they not-so-surreptitiously snap pics. Snapchats with his fuzzy outline pop up on phones throughout campus. Soon after he broke up with his girlfriend, his friends spied someone snapping shots of him talking to another girl in a bar. He doesn't know if it ever hit social media, but the moment underscored his new reality. "I think, honestly, it's going to be hard to find a girl who likes me for who I am," he says. "Are you talking to me because of me or because you want to get some spotlight?"

I**N LATE MARCH**, Prescott, two teammates and two other friends left the beach on spring break in Panama City, Fla., and went to an outdoor concert. Like normal college students, Prescott, 22, and his crew had a couple of drinks, their mindless fun interrupted by a handful of guys who exchanged words with the group. When the talk escalated, one of them

recognized Dak and said, "I don't like you, Prescott. I'm not gonna fight you, I'm going to shoot you."

Jeremy Hicks, a childhood friend of Prescott's who runs a security company in the Shreveport, La., area called GotchaBack Security, stepped in and thought he defused the hostility. But a few minutes later the same men returned with a group of nearly 20 and surrounded Prescott and his friends in the parking lot. "I got a bullet with your name on it," one man said to Prescott. The men jumped Prescott and his friends. One assailant cracked Prescott in the face with a Hennessy bottle, sending him tumbling to the pavement. Others attacked Hicks and junior defensive lineman Torrey Dale and pinned Williams to the ground, where he was pounded on repeatedly.

At one point Prescott leaned forward on his knees in the parking lot, his face looking down as he struggled to rise. An attacker lined up his right foot inches from Prescott's face and stomped him with the bottom of his sneaker. The force from the blow spun Prescott from a near crawling position to his backside. The men fled soon after, leaving Prescott bloody and so disoriented that he toppled over twice trying to get up. He finally stood, barefoot, wearing only a multicolored fluorescent bathing suit stained with blood.

A stranger in a white pickup truck gave Prescott and his crew a ride back to the condo where they were staying. Prescott says he's so thankful for the stranger's kindness that he prays for him often. As much as he needed to dress his wounds and wanted to avoid dealing with police, Prescott was grateful for another reason: "We knew people were taking pictures. We just needed to get out of there."

Prescott decided to leave Panama City immediately. Hicks drove the nearly seven hours back to Starkville, with Prescott getting angry all over again as he watched videos of the beatdown on his iPhone. One of the assailants bragged about it on Twitter—"slumped over some Mississippi football players"—before deleting his account. After the videos went viral and the attack became a national story, Prescott tweeted that he was fine: "Ignorance happens! Be safe on spring break!" He spoke to both coach Dan Mullen and to athletic director Scott Stricklin, each of whom delivered a similar message: "You can't do normal things; you can't do what other students do."

Prescott arrived at the emergency room in Starkville at 4 a.m. "The nurses had their backs turned. They didn't even want to look at me," he says. "I guess they didn't want to see me like that." Prescott ended up with five stitches near his eye and a chipped tooth that's noticeable every time he smiles. He was bruised,

scratched up and in enough pain that he stayed in bed until 5 p.m. two days later. Prescott recovered fully, but the videos of the attack will live forever on the Internet. "It's the world we live in, and it's only going to get worse," he says. "If I want to become a better player and more prestigious, it's only going to get worse. It's just part of it, just live with what I've been handed the best I can."

Prescott declined to press charges, preferring to simply move on. Williams ended up much worse: The beating he took resulted in a pectoral injury that kept

▼▼▼
**TOUGH
BREAK**
Prescott and
friends saw
the downside
of fame when
they got
jumped in a
Panama City
parking lot
in March.



him out of spring practice and may cost him the job as backup quarterback. "You love to think they'll get theirs in another way," Williams says. "As much as we would love to go wherever they go to school and return it, it will come around."

UNTIL DAK PRESCOTT came along, naming the greatest player in Mississippi State history proved the SEC's least compelling bar debate. State has failed to produce an NFL Hall of Fame player, and its most successful alum is probably Kent Hull, the late All-Pro center for the Bills. That doesn't mean the Bulldogs have lacked for attention-getting characters.

If *The Dukes of Hazzard* ever had an SEC football spinoff, quarterback John Bond would have captured a lead role. In 1983 he set the SEC career rushing record for quarterbacks (broken in 2004 by Arkansas' Matt Jones), and he is Mississippi State's biggest star of the last generation. With his flowing mullet and penchant for beer, women and cars, Bond was made for simpler times, and he lived by a simple philosophy. "You knew the highway patrolmen and the secretaries," he says, blue eyes twinkling, "and you'd be fine."

The pilot episode could be set around the game against No. 1 Alabama in 1980. Two days before kickoff coach Emory Bellard promised that the Bulldogs wouldn't have to practice until Tuesday if they upset Bear Bryant's Crimson Tide. That night Bond got into a bar fight, which put him on a well-worn path to the home of trainer Straton Karatassos. Bond rang the bell well after midnight and guzzled milk from the

fridge while Karatassos retrieved his medical gear. Bond needed to get stitches in his hand, but that would have kept him from playing against Bama. So Karatassos taped the cut and Bond continued to get ready for the game.

That chore included packing his bags for a long postvictory visit to a girlfriend at Georgia and having a team manager drive Bond's black Corvette to the game in Jackson, Miss., with instructions to leave it in the lot with a cooler full of Budweisers. "We're going to win Saturday," Bond told him, "and I'm not



coming back to Starkville."

Alabama, coming off two national titles and carrying a 28-game win streak, was a 20-point favorite, but Bond led his team to a historic 6-3 upset. After the game he honked his Corvette's horn as he peeled out of the parking lot, free until Tuesday. "Kent Hull had blood from his butt all the way down the inside of his pants," Bond says of his center. "Everybody thought he was hurt. It was my hand, bleeding up on him."

None of that became a story at the time. And when Bond got clocked over the head with a Jack Daniels bottle in the parking lot of a pizza shop while at State, only Karatassos found out. A few days later Bond and a few teammates tracked down the culprit at Bonnie and Clyde's, a bar in Columbus, Miss., to exact their revenge. Bond credits Prescott for having the maturity to not seek the same.

When Prescott hears the tales of Bond's adventures in college, his eyebrows spike. "I can't even imagine," he says, shaking his head with a smile. When Bond hears how Prescott's every movement is chronicled on Twitter, he flashes that grin again and says, "I can't even imagine."

THE FIRST TIME Prescott signed an autograph he was a senior at Houghton (La.) High. A seven-year-old wandered into the locker room before the game with a pen, and Prescott's hands shook and his heart skipped as he scribbled. "I guarantee," he says, "I was way more nervous than him."

Five years later, signatures and selfies have be-

10

Wins for the
Bulldogs in
2014, only the
third time in
their 74 years
they've
hit double
figures.

60%

Increase in
Mississippi
State's
licensing
revenue over
the last year.

come a lifestyle. Prescott signs everything from checkbooks to kids' hands. He insists on personalizing items to ensure they don't get flipped on eBay. "I'll sit there and take pictures with kids for hours," Prescott says. "When it gets weird is when grown men want to take a selfie."

If Prescott is treated as some combination of Superman and the Pope, that's because in the context of Mississippi State football, he is. On Thanksgiving night in 2013, Prescott came off the bench in the fourth quarter against rival Ole Miss in Starkville and went 11 for 20 for 115 yards while leading two scoring drives in a 17-10 overtime classic. That night, as his family ate turkey dinner at the team hotel, fans interrupted them seeking autographs. When the Prescotts declined, the people lingered to wait them out. Soon after, the family experienced the sight of number 15 jerseys on people other than themselves. "We're going to have to share him," says Valrie Gilbeaux, Prescott's aunt.

Prescott went from regional star to national sensation as the Bulldogs rose up the rankings last year. After Prescott bulldozed through LSU for 373 total yards, he returned from Baton Rouge a Heisman candidate. While he enjoyed the moment, Prescott found himself the unexpected center of attention. He began arriving at class the minute it began, sitting in back and ducking out the moment it ended. "I didn't want to go anywhere," Prescott says.

After No. 3 Mississippi State beat up No. 2 Auburn 38-23 on Oct. 12 to earn the school's first No. 1 ranking, Prescott joined his family and friends for dinner at Lost Pizza in Starkville. Instead of enjoying the standing ovation from patrons when he walked in the door, Prescott worried he'd be greeted that way every time he ate out. After dinner, the staff wanted a picture with Prescott, and it drew so much attention they needed to sneak him out through the kitchen. "That night," he says, "was the moment I was like, This is going to get crazy."

Since then Prescott has encountered autograph seekers in the laundry room at the team's road hotel in Lexington, Ky., and been inundated with holiday-inspired requests. He typically tries to do what he can for friends, but countless numbers he didn't know



A LOT TO SHOULDERS
Prescott has to make late-night runs to the barber to get any privacy and relishes his rare alone time at the football complex.



began popping up on his cellphone. "Christmas time was rough," he says. "Some [friends] didn't get texts responded to."

Last fall, when Prescott bought his dog, Legend, in Aberdeen, Miss., off Craigslist, the seller brought his entire family to witness the transaction and get autographs and pictures. "Nieces, nephews, all of them!" Prescott says. When he drove home after the school year ended, he got pulled over for speeding between Natchitoches and Alexandria, La. The officer returned a few minutes later with a ticket for Prescott for not wearing his seat belt and a familiar request. "You have to let me take a picture," he said. "I gotta show the guys I got Dak Prescott on the interstate." So Prescott stood on I-49 with a policeman in his late 40s, smiling for a selfie as cars whizzed by. "It was a lot better," Prescott says, "than a speeding ticket."

The lowest point came during graduation

(Prescott got a degree in educational psychology last December and is working on a master's in workforce educational leadership), when fans tried to push his grandparents aside so they could get a picture with him. "I actually had to say, 'Ma'am, this is my family.'" Teammates could earn photography minors, they take so many pictures, with fans often just handing them cameras without asking, the expectation being that their only role is playing Prescott's paparazzi. Feeling how inundated Dak has been, Aunt Valrie made up a rule this fall: "I told him I would never ask him for an autograph again for anybody," she says. "If I do, it's because drug lords have my children and it's the only way I can get them back."

SECONDS BEFORE Prescott walks into a conference room in the Mississippi State athletic department this April, he flashes a nervous smile and makes a quick confession. "I've got butterflies," he says.

The State women's golf team is expecting a rote compliance meeting, but instead it gets a surprise motivational speaker before heading to the SEC championship. Prescott grew up more country than country club, but he speaks for nearly five minutes. "Have a great game," he says with a half smile, "if that's what you call it."

The heart of Prescott's speech encourages the golfers to capture the moment and seize the campus's palpable momentum. The recent success of football and women's basketball (round of 32) and the hiring of former UCLA coach Ben Howland in men's basketball represent a zenith for the school's athletic department. The influx of SEC revenue—\$31.2 million annually per school—has spurred \$135 million in new and updated athletic facilities over the last five years and helped hire and keep coaches like Mullen, who is in his seventh season after coming from Florida, where he was the offensive coordinator on the 2006 and '08 national championship teams. The success has also led to a perception overhaul, as the school witnessed a 17% rise in student applications and licensing royalties that jumped 60% last year alone.

Prescott is the face of all that investment and growth, a transformational figure that brought an unprecedented spotlight to the school. Last fall he set school records for passing yards (3,449), total offense (4,435), passing touchdowns (27) and total TDs; he completed 61.6% of his throws and rushed for 986 yards, then spent his off-season obliging as many off-field requests as he could, everything from reading to elementary school students



PASSING IT ALONG State's first All-SEC quarterback since 1974, Prescott is usually able to embrace the burden of being the face of the program.



to visiting kids with cancer at Camp Rising Sun in Columbus. "Being in the spotlight and people constantly feeling like they have to have a piece of you, or say hi to you, that can be taxing," says Stricklin. "Dak is exceptional at that part of it, at understanding the mantle that he gets to carry."

Prescott plans to coach after his professional playing days are over, though his goals have evolved from being a high school coach and math teacher to working in the college game. This future is easy to imagine as he stands before the MSU golfers, at ease while stressing the team's opportunity to become the school's first national champion. "When you make the hard and pressure stuff fun, when you can change that and make it the part you get excited for, you feel at ease, you feel confident," he says. "Let that aspect just set in and you stoke it and just play your game and be as calm as ever, embrace it."

The team thanked Prescott with rousing applause. One of the team members, junior Ji Eun Baik, was so overcome by the moment she burst into tears.

NOT LONG AFTER sunrise one May morning Dak Prescott and his uncle Phillip Ebarb launch a 15-foot flat-bottom aluminum boat into the Sabine River in Port of Orange, Texas. They buzz 15 minutes out to the place where the Sabine's fresh water meets the salt water of the Intercoastal Waterway. They drop anchor at a famil-

iar spot, where the brackish mix offers potential and great variety, everything from catfish and perch to trout and drum. Prescott baits his hook with shrimp and whizzes a sidearm cast—"like Vince Young's delivery," he says, laughing—that plops softly in the water.

Dak's family roots are dug in Vinton, La., hard on the Texas border and far from the SEC's bright lights. Vinton calls itself the Gateway to Cajun Country, and it's where Prescott learned to suck the juices from the body of a crawfish after ripping off its tail. While in Vinton, Prescott enjoys a slower life and all the tastes of home. His grandmothers spoil him, as his Momo (Theodora Taylor) made crab stew and his Mammie (Margaret Ebarb) sent him off with her famous chocolate cake.

Prescott's rise to stardom runs parallel to some difficult personal years for his family. His mother, Peggy, died of colon cancer in 2013, and her father, Glyndell (Paw Paw) Ebarb, died in April after a yearlong decline due to Alzheimer's. Dak's fishing trips with Uncle Phil have helped the healing, especially because Dak knows the lessons he's learning have been passed down from Paw Paw.

An hour into the trip, no fish are biting. Prescott, who is Caucasian, African-American and Native American, dabs some water on his neck and says he's going to tap into his Indian pheromone in honor of Paw Paw, who belonged to the Choctaw-Apache Tribe. On cue, a croaker jumps at the end of his line. He reels it in slowly before releasing it. "I told you," he says, "the pheromone."

They laugh in the quiet of the still morning, then go back to their fishing, with only the whizzing casts cutting the silence.

"Can't get any pictures and auto-graphs out here," says Dak.

"That's what we like about it," Uncle Phil says. □

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CF15

The Trigonometry Of Trickery



❖ BY / ALBERT CHEN • ILLUSTRATIONS BY / ERIC PIATKOWSKI

▼▼▼

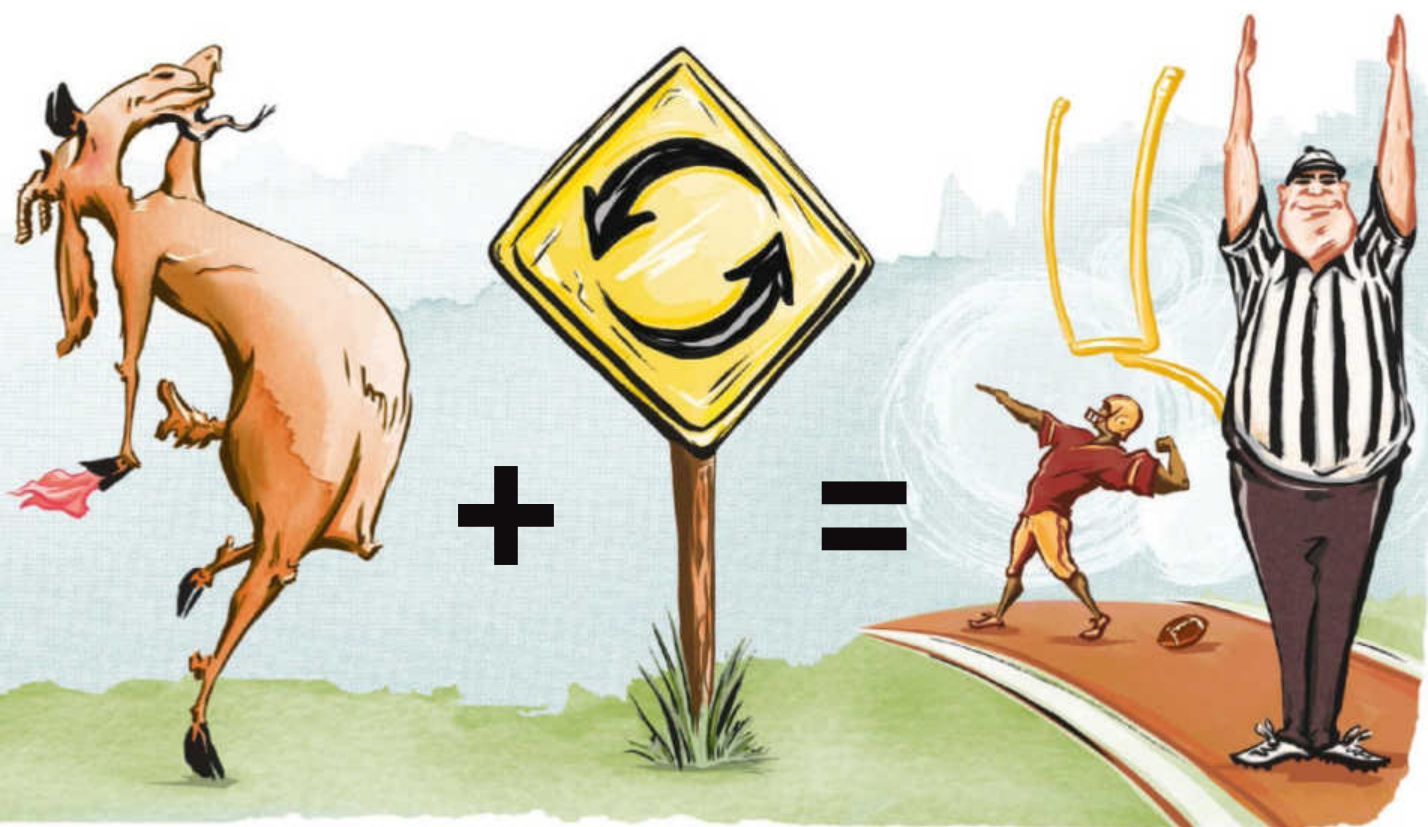
They call to mind school-yard stunts and video-game gadgetry, but trick plays hark back to the roots of the game, summoning the genius of Pop Warner and John Heisman—even if sometimes they're more fun than effective. Bring forth the Fainting Goat!



BEFORE WE TALK about the Annexation of Puerto Rico or the Boise funk or the masterstroke of deceit that led to the toppling of a dynasty, let's begin with the Fainting Goat.

The idea sprang from the mind of 46-year-old Arkansas State coach Blake Anderson, who views trick plays like Powerball tickets: The more you have stashed in your back pocket, the better your odds of hitting it big. Anderson's Red Wolves were double-digit underdogs heading into their game at Miami last September, so it was time to get creative. The coach and his staff drew up a fake punt, with a twist: A gunner, lined up in the slot, would create a diversion by collapsing at the snap, much like a person suffering cardiac arrest—or a farm animal losing consciousness—allowing another receiver to sneak out for a pass. To illustrate how to sell the deception, Red Wolves coaches showed the team a YouTube clip of fainting goats.

The gunner appointed to the role, sophomore receiver Booker Mays, rehearsed for his part with the diligence of a thespian confronting the death scene from *Julius Caesar*. Mays watched the YouTube video over and over. He



took numerous dry-run tumbles during practice. He tried to understand the inner demons of a woozy ungulate. Finally, with five minutes to go in the second quarter and Arkansas State down 20–7, the curtain on his big moment rose. Mays’s performance may not have been Tony-worthy, but he played it with enough conviction to draw double takes from defenders, allowing senior corner Frankie Jackson to break free running down the opposite sideline. Alas, the punter underthrew the ball, Miami picked it off and the Red Wolves lost 41–20.

The first lesson of the Fainting Goat? A trick play isn’t easy to pull off—one thing goes wrong and it all collapses like a Jenga tower. The second lesson: A trick play sometimes works even when it doesn’t. “You can’t imagine the mileage we got out of it,” says Anderson. “We want our kids to be hungry and engaged, and there was a tremendous amount of energy generated from that play. The players would ask as soon as they walked in on Mondays: What do we got this week?”

That particular mischief resonated beyond Jonesboro, Ark., too. Within days the video drew more than 10 million views. It turns out that the Curious Incident of the Goat in Game-time was the perfect preamble to a season of fumblerooskis and misdirections, of reverse laterals and jump passes, of a 400-pound lineman catching a touchdown pass (*page 48*) and a player hiding in the end zone on a kickoff return. For fans of the eccentric side of college football it was a glorious season, and an inspiration for programs everywhere in 2015: Sometimes it pays to embrace the crazy.

DESPITE THE GAME-AS-WAR metaphors and the austere, authoritarian coaches, from Ohio State’s Woody Hayes to one Nicholas Lou Saban, patron saint of somberness and Alabama, the game has always included plenty of chicanery. One of the sport’s first powerhouses was the Carlisle Indian school, a team of undersized boarding school players from Pennsylvania that used deception and



DOUBLE-REVERSE PASS

Ohio State was trailing Alabama 21-13 with 19 seconds left in the first half of the Sugar Bowl when the coaches pulled this play out of their bag of tricks.



misdirection to defeat bigger and faster opponents. Carlisle deployed everything from double passes to a sewing machine—in a 1902 game against rival Harvard, the Indians scored on a kickoff return after one player shoved the football inside another's jersey, which had been outfitted with an elastic band. "We never considered it a strictly legitimate play," the Carlisle coach, Pop Warner, later recounted, "and only employed it against Harvard as a good joke on the haughty Crimson players."

Warner's trickery was a one-off, but another foundational figure in the game, John Heisman, invented a gadget play that's still fooling 'em. The fumblerooski—in which the quarterback intentionally leaves the ball on the ground after taking it from the center, allowing a teammate to pick it up and run wild—rose to prominence when Nebraska used it in the 1984 Orange Bowl for a 19-yard TD, the first step in an attempted comeback from a 17-0 deficit that ended in a 31-30 Miami win.

It's the sort of play Hollywood would love—and

has. *The Longest Yard* (2005 edition) featured a fumblerooski, as did *Little Giants*, the 1994 flick in which a peewee team defeats its rival on the final snap by running the now-familiar play under an odd new name.

Coach: "What kind of play you got for this?"

Kid: "How about the Annexation of Puerto Rico?"

Whatever you call it, the play is enjoying a bit of revival: In a 69-28 win over Mountain West Conference rival New Mexico in 2013, Fresno State turned a faux fumble into a 26-yard touchdown run, and in last December's Music City Bowl, LSU ran a version of it for a 24-yard gain against Notre Dame in a 31-28 loss.

The fumblerooski's comeback may not be coincidental. As the pressure to win (and the money at stake) rises, coaches have been more willing to toss aside the smashmouth orthodoxies and codes of machismo that ruled the second half of the 20th century. Everything from uniform designs to offensive schemes to coaching hires have bucked



convention. Mavericks like Mike Leach (Washington State), Chip Kelly (Oregon and the Eagles) and Gus Malzahn (Auburn) are leading a charge outside the box. Eight years before taking over at Auburn, Malzahn was a high school coach dreaming up plays that unfolded like Benny Hill sketches, including Starburst (in which players huddled together, around the football, before scattering in all directions) and Where's the Tee? (in which the field goal team would act as if it had forgotten its kicking tee, before snapping the ball and catching the other side flat-footed).

With the move to hyperpaced spread offenses, misdirection has become more common. During the last bowl season, for instance, double-pass or reverse laterals were executed to perfection and turned into touchdowns by Baylor (Cotton Bowl), TCU (Peach Bowl), Colorado (Las Vegas Bowl) and Tennessee (Taxslayer Bowl). Sometimes, the push for innovation can get downright kooky. In the second quarter of a game last October, as Oklahoma

▼▼▼
BIG LIFT
 Thomas [3] hauled in a beauty of pass from Spencer that changed the momentum of the playoff semifinal.

kicked off to TCU, returner B.J. Catalon, decked out in purple from head to toe, hid in the end zone by laying down in the middle of the purple O painted on the field. Another Horned Frog gathered in the kick, then threw the ball across the field to Catalon, who stood uncovered after popping up and reached midfield. (Recalling Lesson 1, the play, alas, was called back because of holding.)

Regardless of the details, the goal of each trick play is the same: "You're looking to steal six points and create a big swing in the momentum of the game," says Tom Herman, who was Ohio State's offensive coordinator last season and is now the coach at Houston. Herman doesn't refer to the genre as trick plays; he calls them "specials." The Buckeyes had, by Herman's estimation, four or five specials that were mainstays in their playbook through the season. Then he says there were others that were "more special," which were introduced during the days leading up to a game—custom-tailored to exploit an opponent's weakness, such as a certain



FAINTING GOAT

Arkansas State faced long odds against Miami, so with five minutes to go in the first half, the Aggies unveiled a play that's come to define their program.



defender overpursuing on a particular kind of play.

In an age of digital video, coaches can easily copy and tweak plays they've seen other teams run; a vast trove of craziness is never more than a click away. "The wheels are always turning," says Anderson, who is entering his second season at Arkansas State. "We watch a lot of people that are like us for inspiration—Baylor, Oklahoma State, Houston, East Carolina, they're all always up to cool, interesting things. And of course, there's Boise State."

OF COURSE, Boise: College football's great laboratory, the winningest FBS school of the last decade and a program whose signature victory came in the 2007 Fiesta Bowl, when a brilliant hat trick of gimmick plays fueled one of the great upsets of the century, a 43–42 overtime win over No. 8 Oklahoma. Since then trick plays, like the blue turf, have become part of "who we are and a part of our DNA," says Broncos coach Bryan Harsin, who was the offensive coordinator and play-caller in that win.

INSULT TO FAUX INJURY

Mays made two catches against Miami but stood out for his flawless fall, even though the play ended with a pick.



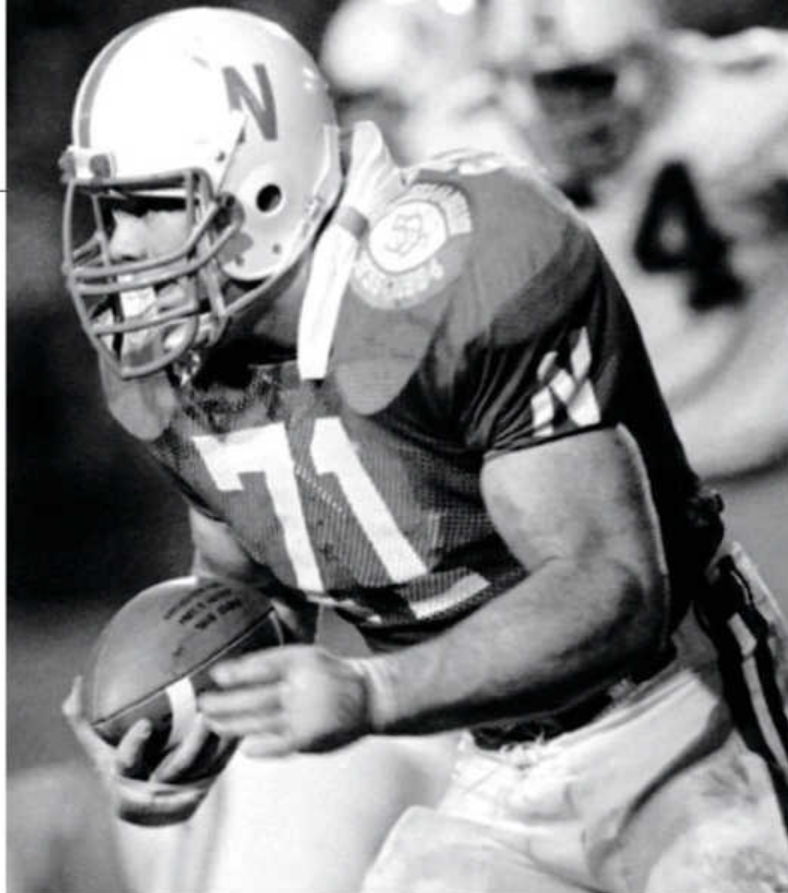
YOUTUBE (VIDEO STILL); ALAN DIAZ/AP (MAYS)

Harsin has a term for the neverland where Boise's trick plays exist: the funk. "There's not a real playbook for them, and that's why it's the funk—you're sitting around and you just kind of come up with something funky," he says. "None of it is drawn up, it's all in our heads. I don't want to be carrying around a book, and if it's stolen, then it's all over for us."

The process at Boise is more democratic than at most programs. It's not only that during games every backup quarterback is on the headphones chiming in on play-calling, but also that players and coaches sit around a table, like TV scribes in a writer's room, tracing ideas on a whiteboard. Everyone is encouraged to make a suggestion, no matter how insane. "You walk in to a meeting, and there are four plays drawn up by players," says Harsin. "Usually you're like, Eh, I don't know about that. But every once in a while there'll be one where you think, You know, that's not bad."

Harsin says he's reminded of the 2007 Fiesta Bowl almost every day: "Just the other day the Espys were on, and someone was like, remember when it was the game of the year?" The madness began with a hook-and-lateral play called Circus. The Broncos were facing fourth-and-18 from midfield, down a touchdown with 18 seconds to play; senior receiver Drisan James, streaking across the middle of the field, caught the ball then flipped to receiver Jerard Rabb, who was racing by in the opposite direction and took it in for the touchdown. (They had run Circus only once, during an informal Friday walk-through days before the game.) Later came the direct snap halfback pass. On a fourth-and-two from the Sooners' six-yard line Vinny Perretta, a halfback who hadn't thrown the ball all year, lined up behind center and tossed a touchdown to tight end Derek Schouman. (It was the first time Boise had used the play in a game.) What followed—a two-point conversion attempt to win the game—is Sharpied on the Whiteboard of Fame as one of college football's greatest plays.

In the Statue of Liberty a running back takes the ball out of the quarterback's hand as the latter cocks his arm to throw. The Boise version featured a funky twang. Instead of bringing the ball up, the QB rears back and fakes a throw with an empty hand while putting the ball behind his back with



▼▼▼
**DROP
 AND ROLL**
 Heisman
 invented the
 fumblerooski, a
 play Nebraska
 guard Dean
 Steinkuhler
 took in for a
 touchdown to
 help win the
 '84 national
 championship.

his off hand, allowing the back to flash behind him and take it.

Eight years later what's striking is that Harsin and then coach Chris Petersen had stuck with the call after Oklahoma called a timeout to prepare for the two-point try. When play resumed Boise trotted onto the field with the right side stacked, which suggested a wide receiver screen based on the team's tendencies. The sequence is pure magic: Quarterback Jared Zabransky fakes a screen while hiding the ball; tailback Ian Johnson freezes in the backfield until the fake is properly sold; he then breaks left, takes the ball and sprints untouched into the end zone. The play provided the David-and-Goliath moment that justified the BCS and put the entire affair on any credible list of best games ever.

"Every player here now grew up on that play—whether it's Little League, junior high or high school, somebody's run a version of it," says Harsin. "I'll walk out there, and the quarterbacks and tailbacks will be doing it pre-practice just for fun. For most of the guys there's a bit nostalgia to it—they're always asking when we're going to run it." Harsin is sometimes happy to oblige. Facing Arizona in the first quarter of the Fiesta Bowl last January, the Broncos called for Statue, and running back Jay Ajayi ran for a 16-yard touchdown that gave Boise a 21-0 lead. The Broncos won 38-30, punctuating a 12-2 season that reestablished them as a national power after an 8-5 finish in 2013. Says



STATUE OF LIBERTY

Boise State has become known for trick plays, a reputation cemented when it ran three, including a Statue of Liberty for a two-point conversion, to beat the Sooners in the 2007 Fiesta Bowl.



Harsin of the savory funk that's a vital ingredient in the Boise brew, "It's fun for the fans, it's fun for the players, it's fun for the coaches. But we don't waste opportunities in games just for fun. They're fun—but they're highly calculated."

CHILL OUT."

These were the words Tom Herman heard in his headset moments after he made one of the craziest play calls of the 2014 season. As soon as he made it he feared his choice would go horribly wrong, and he came close to hyperventilating. This was in the Sugar Bowl, the semifinal game of the first national playoff, and the calming voice on the other end of the headset was that of coach Urban Meyer. The Buckeyes, down 21-13, were on the Alabama 13-yard line with 19 seconds left in the first half. Herman had called a double-reverse pass—quarterback Cardale Jones would hand off to running back Jalin Marshall, who would lateral to wide receiver Evan Spencer, who would then throw

into the end zone. The Buckeyes knew they would use this play against Alabama, "we just didn't know when," says Herman. "At that point we'd had two drives that stalled in the red zone, and we're thinking, Man, we're in the red zone again, we got to punch it in this time."

But just after Herman made the call he realized the offense was at the right hash mark; Spencer is righthanded and had practiced the play only from the left hash, rolling to his right. "Really, it was bad, bad coaching," says Herman, who screamed at Meyer to change the play. But the coach, not wanting to burn his last timeout, stood firm. "Let's see what happens," Meyer said. "Chill out."

The Buckeyes had run the play earlier in the season, but Spencer got cold feet and kept the ball. It was a huge roll of the dice but a necessary one. "You need explosive plays to win," Herman says. "And one way to do it is with specials." He recalls seeing a study of 1,000 football games at the high school, college and NFL level. "If you win the turnover battle,



and if you have more explosive plays”—defined as gains of 12 yards or more—“than the other team, then you win that game 98% of the time.

“It’s really hard to go on a 10-, 12-play drive against a really good defense and put the ball in the end zone.”

And against a team like Alabama? “It just doesn’t happen,” Herman says. “You have to make play calls like that.” He laughs. “Just from the correct hash mark.”

Herman held his breath as the play unfolded: Jones gave to Marshall, who took a step to his right, then flipped the ball to Spencer, and Spencer, moving to his left, pulled up and lofted a perfect pass toward the left pylon, where receiver Michael Thomas grabbed it over the Crimson Tide defender, coming down with a sliver of turf between his foot and the sideline. It was a big play—arguably the biggest of the game—that drew the Buckeyes to within 21–20. Riding a wave of momentum into the second half, Ohio State went on to beat Ala-

▼▼▼
**BACK
 FLASH**
Zabransky (5)
faked to
his right as
he put the
ball behind
his back,
allowing
Johnson
to grab it
and go.

bama 42–35, ending the Crimson Tide’s pursuit of a fourth national title in six years. Eleven days later Meyer & Co. upset Oregon 42–20 to win the first College Football Playoff.

Sometimes to win a championship you have to embrace the funk. Sometimes, as Blake Anderson will tell you, before you hit it big with the lottery ticket in your playbook, you have to flop miserably. Although even failure can bring rewards. A few weeks after the end of the regular season—the Red Wolves finished 7–5 and earned a trip to the GoDaddy Bowl—Anderson went to St. Louis to watch quarterback Austin Davis, whom he’d coached at Southern Miss, play for the Rams. On the field before the game a few members of the St. Louis staff walked up to Anderson and a few of the assistants he’d brought along.

“You guys were the ones behind that?” asked one of the Rams’ coaches, recalling the Fainting Goat. “We need something like that in our playbook. What else you got?” □





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Tackle *This*

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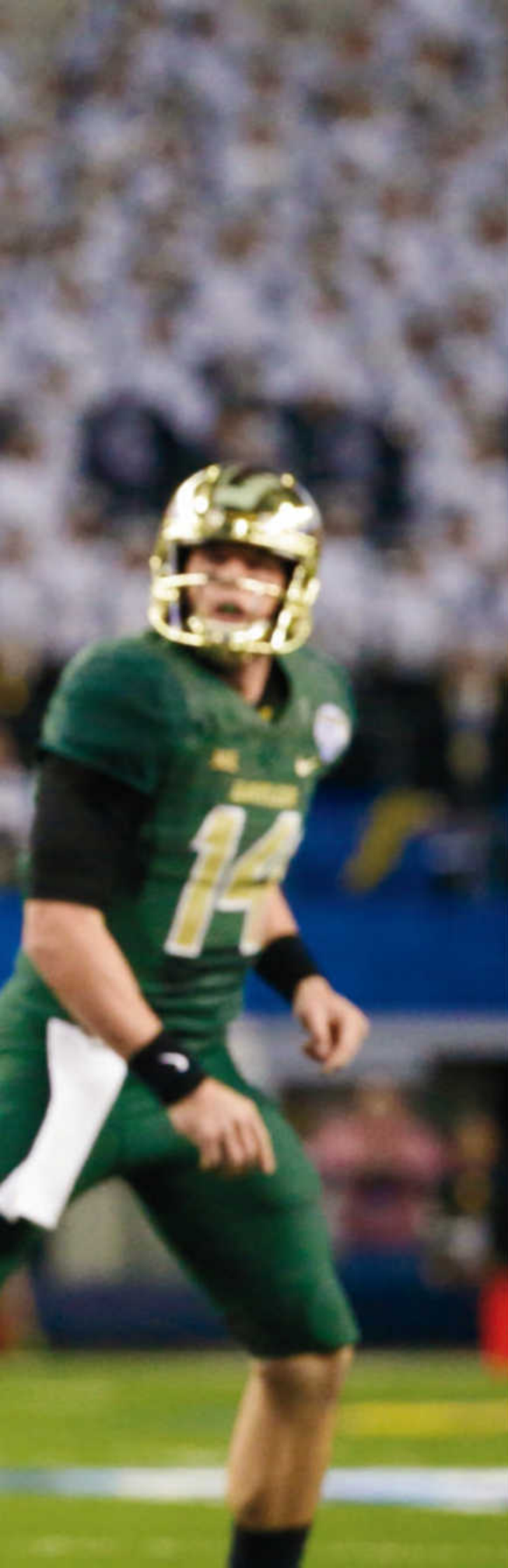
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A one-off play designed for a mammoth guard with good hands and a quick burst has turned into a full-time experiment in the lab of a mad scientist. Only Baylor coach Art Briles could dream up a tight end like 6' 7", 392-pound LaQuan McGowan, who rumbles through the nightmares of safeties across the nation



"THE QUARTERBACKS
ARE RIPPING IT AS
HARD AS THEY CAN
FROM 10 TO 12 YARDS,
AND [LAQUAN IS]
CATCHING EVERYTHING,"
BRILES SAYS. "AND
WE'RE THINKING, THIS
GUY'S GOT A PRETTY
GOOD SKILL SET."



LM OTERO/AP

▼▼▼
**OFF
GUARD**
Petty (14) and McGowan—wearing his O-line number on his helmet—combined for a surprising TD at the Cotton Bowl.

H

E PLANNED to dance. When LaQuan McGowan crossed the goal line, he would shimmy in that way only truly large men can shimmy. Vast stores of potential energy would turn into waves of kinetic energy simply because a 425-pounder *got down*. The sight alone—of a super-jumbo-sized man scoring a touchdown and then shaking the entirety of what his mama gave him—would make everyone watching the Cotton Bowl smile. But would it make McGowan smile?

The Baylor junior readily admits he does not smile often, which perplexes those who know him. “Smiling’s not that big of an issue to me,” McGowan says. “As long as I know that I’m happy, I’m O.K.” And he is O.K., though he wouldn’t mind losing a little weight. How much? Ten pounds? Thirty pounds? “I might just tell you 200,” he says. McGowan is tired of squeezing his 6’ 7”, 392-pound body in and out of cars, tired of scouring the Web for stylish pants in a 54-inch waist. (McGowan’s waist is a trim 48, but thanks to the squats he does in Baylor’s weight room, his thighs and butt require something a little roomier.) “In high school kids would be going into Hollister and Abercrombie & Fitch,” McGowan says. “I’d say, ‘Can I come in? You have anything in 4X?’” McGowan would like to sit on a toilet without worrying he’ll crush it, and this is after dropping 48 pounds from his all-time high of 440 in the spring of 2014. But McGowan knows the size that maddens him also makes him special. It makes his lone career touchdown the subject of endless fascination, the source of more than 100,000 YouTube hits and the seed of a so-crazy-it-just-might-work idea for the mad scientist who runs Baylor’s football team.

McGowan’s TD was supposed to come in the regular-season finale against Kansas State. Art Briles and his assistants had noticed their largest offensive lineman catching balls from the quarterbacks before practices. “They’re ripping it as hard as they can from 10 to 12 yards, and he’s catching everything,” Briles says. “And we’re thinking, This guy’s got a pretty good skill set.” So the coaches drew up a play: unbalanced line, McGowan on the left side in jersey number 80 with no receivers outside him, so an unsuspecting defense would think he’s the left tackle. Snap the ball, pop it to the big man and let him rumble.

The opportunity never came against the Wildcats, but it did come in the third quarter of the Cotton Bowl, on second-and-11 from the Michigan State 18-yard line. McGowan, wearing that receiver's jersey—which, when pulled all the way down, made it hard for him to breathe—floated into the area just vacated by the linebackers. Bryce Petty zipped a pass into a pair of hands that could palm basketballs since the fifth grade. McGowan turned and sprinted away from a quintet of stunned Spartans. “I didn’t realize it until I watched the film,” Petty says, “but that dude had a burst.” When he crossed the goal line, McGowan did not dance. “I was going to, but I turned around and Antwan Goodley is there,” McGowan says. “He’s like, *Jump!*” Figuring a receiver with 21 collegiate touchdown catches would know the best way to celebrate, McGowan complied. Goodley tried to hoist his teammate. “He got me off the ground about two inches,” McGowan says.

McGowan’s touchdown would get buried by Michigan State’s 21-point fourth-quarter comeback for a 42–41 win. But for weeks Briles couldn’t stop thinking about the play. McGowan had soft hands and surprising speed over a 10-yard span. Had they caught up to him, how many Spartans would it have taken to drag down a 400-pounder running at top rate? Why limit McGowan to this one trick play?

B RILES HAS NEVER worried much about offensive convention. He started lining receivers up outside the numbers as a high school coach, and when his peers asked why he’d give up running the option to send a player on an out route, Briles would counter: With the receiver split so wide, the defense has to decide whether to leave the corner alone with him or help with a safety, who then is useless against the run. So as 2015 spring practice dawned, Briles decided to try another convention-defying experiment. While McGowan is probably too big for Baylor’s O-line, he could be the perfect size as a change-of-pace tight end who flexes off the line. “It’s like we’re living in 2035,” Briles says. “I think in 20 years there will be a lot of 400-pound football players. Some of them will be skill [players], but right now I know of only one.” Petty, who was drafted by the Jets, has been a believer from the moment Briles proposed the original pass to McGowan. “Coach Briles would put in plays, and sometimes in my head I’d think, Dude, this will never work,” Petty says. “As soon as he talked about this, I thought, This is gonna work.”

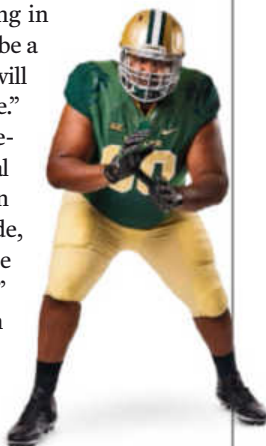
Briles doesn’t consider McGowan’s position switch a gimmick, and he became more confident after watching the big man catch passes

21

McGowan's shoe size, which led to his wearing a pair of Shaquille O'Neal's castoff 23s to play high school basketball.

54

Size of McGowan's pants. Although his waist is a 48, he needs the extra room for his thighs.



during spring ball—and had to limit live contact with McGowan because he feared for his defenders. Still, when Baylor opens at SMU, on Sept. 4, McGowan expects stares from Mustangs defenders the first time he takes the field. He won’t mind. After all, he remembers how high school opponents gawked when he trotted out as a 370-pound kicker.

At Cal Farley’s Boys Ranch, students pitched in where they could. The ranch opened in 1939 when Farley, a pro wrestler, started the school in the courthouse of an old ghost town on 120 acres 36 miles northwest of Amarillo, Texas. It was a place where boys from broken homes could find, as Farley put it, “a shirttail to hang onto.” The ranch has turned into a tiny town with a post office, 28 homes, an activities center, a rodeo ring and 500 residents, all revolving



around an elementary, middle and high school. Every year the ranch receives about 4,000 calls on behalf of children who need help. But the ranch, funded by private donations, a foundation set up in the 1960s and an annual rodeo that attracts about 10,000 people, can take only roughly 150 students annually.

McGowan’s mother, N’Teasha Smith, called a Boys Ranch counselor before her son entered sixth grade, in 2004. McGowan wasn’t a behavior problem, but Smith worried about raising her only child in crime-ridden South Dallas, and the ranch agreed, admitting LaQuan for middle school.

The 400-mile drive from Dallas to the ranch may as well have been a voyage to the moon. McGowan left a teeming city and arrived in a place 50 miles from the New Mexico border, with actual tumbleweeds rolling past. McGowan’s new surroundings shocked him, but his threshold for crying is even higher than his threshold for smiling. So while his mother bawled, he sat silently. Besides, McGowan understood the underlying reasons for his move across the state. “It was time for something new,” he says. “And that was it.”



"I RESENTED MY MOM AT FIRST," MCGOWAN SAYS. "WHY DID SHE LEAVE ME THERE? BUT ALL IN ALL, BOYS RANCH CHANGED MY LIFE." OTHERWISE, "WOULD I BE SELLING DRUGS? WOULD I BE PLAYING FOOTBALL?"

EVEN THEN, McGowan was huge, bigger than most of the adults he encountered. This kept anyone from picking on him, but it also created a strange dynamic with teachers and house parents. "There's a lot of pressure that comes with being big," McGowan says. "People expect more out of you. They treat you like you're older. But I was still a kid. In a way, I had to mature a lot faster." So he did.

The accommodations at Boys Ranch are, fittingly, ranch-style houses. A pair of house parents and about a dozen students live in each home. They have kitchens with dual ovens and dishwashers, which were ideal for a kid who loved to bake his own corn bread (with brown sugar mixed in) and the cinnamon rolls that come in a tube. Daniel and Andrea Moser were McGowan's house parents for two years, and the couple—he's 5' 3" and she's 5' 1"—grew to love the giant in their care. Daniel called his towering charge Little Man; McGowan called him Big Guy. During a house trip to Six Flags in Arlington when McGowan was in eighth grade, Daniel remembers park-goers asking McGowan for his autograph. They were sure he would be some-

▼▼▼
BROTHER BEAR
As a tight end McGowan hopes to be less of a gimmick than the Fridge (opposite), who played running back at a mere 335.

one someday, if he wasn't already. On that same trip Andrea bought McGowan a pair of size 18 Asics running shoes. It was the first time he'd had properly fitting shoes since outgrowing standard sizes. Later, after McGowan reached his current size of 21, Boys Ranch athletic director Paul Jones persuaded the Suns to send along a pair of Shaquille O'Neal's size 23s so McGowan could be more comfortable on the basketball court. He wasn't. "They were soooo big," he says.

The Mosers had to chat with McGowan about flopping down on the furniture, but they never had to worry about the other boys in their house fighting. "Whenever a scuffle would break out, [LaQuan] would walk in and everything would stop," Daniel says. Then everyone would wait. "We didn't know what side he was going to be on," Andrea says. The Mosers would learn that McGowan usually took their side, and before long he became something of a really big brother to their two young children.

McGowan's housemates may have feared him, but he never wanted to hurt anyone, an excellent quality most of the time but a terrible one on the football field. Andrea watched McGowan play on both lines of scrimmage (and kick) for the Roughriders and asked why he didn't simply splatter defenders or blockers at will. "I was afraid to hurt them, ma'am," she recalls him saying. So Moser decided to offer pregame help. "I'm going to make you mad before you go," she told McGowan, so she pestered him on the way out the door.

McGowan learned to summon more aggression while continuing to flash his unique athleticism. "I dropped back into coverage when I wasn't really supposed to," he says of his one career interception. "I was playing noseguard. [The quarterback] said, 'Hut,' and I stood, backed up and caught the ball." Jones, the AD, still keeps a video of McGowan recovering a fumble and racing the length of the field for a touchdown. In the clip McGowan looks like an NFL player dropped into a Pop Warner game, but even at twice the size of some opponents he pulls away from his pursuers. The burst Petty saw on that Cotton Bowl video was always there. "I don't know what they thought they were going to do if they caught him," Jones says. Down in Waco, Briles says the same thing.

Even before Baylor and Missouri offered scholarships, McGowan enjoyed a moment of football fame. On Thanksgiving weekend in 2009, house parent Hal Blackburn took a group to Amarillo to watch *The Blind Side*, which had recently opened. "From the moment we got out of the vehicle until we got back in, people were doing double and triple takes," Blackburn says. "They were wondering if Michael Oher

had come for the opening.” Only the high school junior before their eyes outweighed then NFL rookie tackle Oher by about 50 pounds.

MCGOWAN THRIVED at Boys Ranch. He starred in football and basketball and won the 2010 Class 1A state shot put championship. He held paying jobs in the custodial department and as a dishwasher in the cafeteria. He usually stayed on the good side of the ranch’s color-coded behavior guide—enjoying the freedoms of a gold ranking rather than the restrictions of a red one. He wasn’t perfect, but an act he considers one of his worst transgressions elicited laughs from a group of his old house parents when they heard of it years later.

As a senior, McGowan lived in a building called Craig House. He and his housemates figured out how to trick the motion sensors mounted over their bedroom doors by taping some toilet paper over them. McGowan, the only one who could reach the sensors without a ladder, was tasked with blinding them. One night, as the house parents slept, the kids staged an epic pillow fight, and one kid dumped water on McGowan. He swore revenge, loading his pillowcase with anything he could find. He tossed in nail clippers. He tossed in a baseball. He tossed in the Bible he still carries today. And when McGowan found that boy, he swung. “I busted his head open,” McGowan says, although he did no long-term damage.

McGowan usually used that Bible for more peaceful purposes, often sneak-peaking at it in classes. “I guess you’re not supposed to be reading the Bible in class,” McGowan says, “but I don’t think there’s a rule against it.” Like many Boys Ranch students, McGowan was baptized while at school, although not, like most others, in the old horse trough in the chapel. In March 2008, 15-year-old LaQuan couldn’t fit in the trough. Instead, he was dunked in a nearby fishing pond. After the ceremony McGowan told Andrea he’d never enter that water again. “There are things in there that could eat you,” McGowan told Moser. “I don’t think anything would eat you, LaQuan,” Moser replied.

During his senior year he signed to play for Baylor because he liked Briles and because being in Waco

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BIG GRAB
McGowan
(with Petty)
has shed
some pounds
since the
Cotton Bowl,
going from
440 to
around 400
to improve
his mobility.



would keep him close to his paternal grandmother, Dorothy Sanders, who still lived in Dallas. (Sanders passed away in 2013.) So in ’11, after six years, McGowan left behind the dust and tumbleweeds of the Boys Ranch. “I kind of resented my mom at first,” he says. “Why did she leave me there? But all in all, Boys Ranch changed my life.” McGowan still imagines what might have been otherwise: “Would I be doing something I’m not supposed to? Would I be selling drugs like most people end up doing? Would I be playing football?”

MCGOWAN IS playing football, but in a way hardly anyone besides Briles could have imagined. An offensive lineman with McGowan’s bulk would struggle to run Baylor’s preferred 90 to 100 offensive plays a game. But a player that size can run one fifth of those plays as a flexed tight end. He can catch pop passes or quick screens against linebackers and defensive backs who can neither reach around him to deflect the pass nor outjump him. (Even at his weight McGowan can dunk a basketball.) Perhaps, Briles muses, a safety could hop aboard a linebacker. “That might be the only alternative,” Briles says. “Get on somebody’s back and then be eye level.” In the run game McGowan can provide a massive obstacle. “When he hits somebody, they’re going to move,” Briles says.

Briles proudly contends that McGowan is the largest player to score a touchdown in a major college football game, and he’s probably correct. Remember when William (Refrigerator) Perry was scoring touchdowns for the Bears in the 1980s? His listed weight was 335 pounds. That was considered huge.

Briles might also be correct about the weight of the game in 2035. The rosters of the college teams that finished in the AP Top 10 after the 1995 season included 34 players weighing 300 pounds or more. The rosters of the Top 10 after last season included 136 players listed at 300 or more. Still, this remains an experiment. McGowan probably won’t challenge junior receiver Corey Coleman or sophomore KD Cannon for the team lead in catches or receiving yards, but he will change the dynamics of how teams defend the Bears. “I’m just a diversion,” McGowan says. “They’re going to be watching me, and all of a sudden KD is gone.” But that’s a joke: McGowan expects to play a major role in the offense, carrying the ball for thousands of young men too big to buy clothes off the rack. “If this works,” he says, “everybody’s going to get their biggest player and put him at tight end.”

If that happens? “That would be pretty cool,” McGowan says. “I think I would smile then.” □

FUTURE OR FANTASY: ARE 300-POUND SKILL POSITION PLAYERS ON THE WAY?

BY / TOM TAYLOR

There are no 6' 7", 400-pound players in the NFL, but there are two that huge playing or committed to play college ball; Baylor junior tight end LaQuan McGowan and BYU offensive/defensive lineman Motekiai Langi, who will suit up in 2017 after a two-year Mormon mission in Arizona. Each has athleticism that belies his size. McGowan ran the 40 in 5.42 seconds last year, when he weighed closer to 440 pounds. BYU has never seen Langi, 18, on a football field, but Cougars coaches offered him a scholarship after watching him play basketball and rugby in his native Tonga, during which he showed impressive speed and coordination.

Does the emergence of these two behemoths suggest that Baylor coach Art Briles is right in predicting a rise in 300-pound skill-position players

within 20 years? The average height and weight of quarterbacks, receivers, running backs and tight ends in the NFL has increased by 3.7 inches (to 6' 1.7") and 45.3 pounds (to 224.8) since the league's inception in 1920. But even allowing for that growth, McGowan and Langi would still be extreme physiological outliers.

While there are taller players in both college and the NFL, there are none heftier. McGowan weighs 142 pounds more than the next heaviest tight end in the Big 12, Iowa State freshman Cole Anderson. And Saints tackle Zach Strief, who has lined up at tight end in

some formations, weighs in at 349 pounds, 43 fewer than McGowan.

However, the future for McGowan's physical type—gargantuan and fast—as a skill player would be at tight end if anywhere in the NFL. In the last 10 years the average QB added 0.3 inches and lost

1.1 pounds; running backs shrank by 0.6 inches and 9.4 pounds; and wide receivers dropped 0.3 inches and 7.8 pounds. But tight ends have been steadily growing since the position was invented in the middle of the last century. In the last 55 years players at that spot have added an average of 1.7 inches and 42.4 pounds. If that trend keeps going, by 2035 the average tight end will weigh 270. That's a few pounds shy of Briles's prediction, but it is also an average, implying there will be a fair number of players above that figure.

But it's about more than size. What separates McGowan is not simply his height and weight, or his speed, but the combination of those. Averaging the stats of 29 defensive backs at the 2015 NFL combine provides a profile of player who's 5' 11", 192 pounds with a 40 time of 4.52. When McGowan hits top speed, his momentum (over 17,000 pound-feet per second) will be 34.5% greater than an average NFL tight end's and 70.5% greater than

the composite DB's from the combine.

Jumping in McGowan's way when he's at full rumble would be roughly equivalent to getting hit by a motorcycle going 25 mph. So McGowan might be easy to catch, but he'll be hard to stop.

SIZE MATTERS Langi (above left) towers over his fellow missionary, and McGowan dwarfs part-time Saints tight end Strief (right).





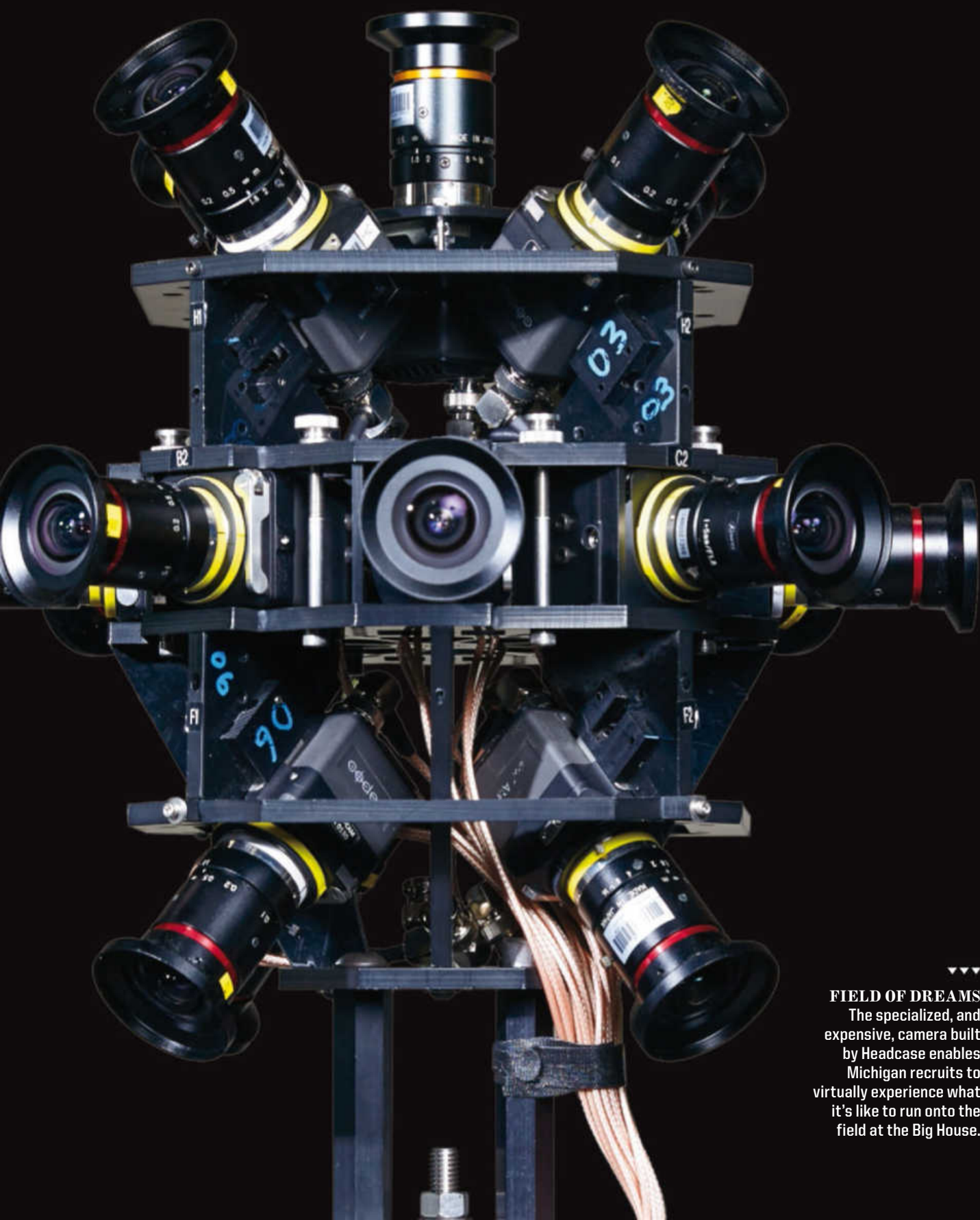
UNREAL

BY / LINDSAY SCHNELL

Virtual reality is growing by leaps and bounds, and sports are proving to be especially fertile ground for the new technology. Now several companies are using it to push the limits of practice, analysis, the fan experience and, especially, recruiting. And this is only the beginning

PHOTOGRAPH BY / BRIAN LOWE

COURTESY OF HEADCASE VR (ABOVE)



FIELD OF DREAMS

The specialized, and expensive, camera built by Headcase enables Michigan recruits to virtually experience what it's like to run onto the field at the Big House.

D

aaaaaaaaaaamn."

This is the reaction, in unison, of 12 Michigan football players as they begin to understand the future of recruiting. During a meeting at Schembechler Hall in mid-June, Taylor Kavanaugh of Headcase, a Los Angeles-based virtual reality company, holds up a custom-made headset designed to mimic the Wolverines' famous blue-and-maize winged helmet. Kavanaugh tells the group that, with the blessing of coach Jim Harbaugh and guidance from tight ends coach Jay Harbaugh,

Headcase has created several pieces of VR content that will help distance Michigan from everyone else in college football. One segment is about "a day in the life of a Michigan football player," Kavanaugh says, and another is about the "Michigan game-day experience." During the recruiting process prospects often ask coaches and players what it's like to play football at Michigan. With this headset and content, Kavanaugh says, they'll have an answer they can understand and experience—all from the comfort of their couch.

Earlier this year a Bay Area company, STRIVR, showed college and NFL programs how virtual reality can change the way players, especially quarterbacks, experience "live" reps and break down game film. In Ann Arbor the conversation turns to how VR can revolutionize recruiting. Kavanaugh, one of Headcase's five cocreators (and a college classmate of the writer), gives a quick Virtual Reality 101, although he prefers to call it *immersive reality* because you're not separated from the content but rather inside it. Then he invites the players to try the headset. "Rock, paper, scissors for who gets to go first!" yells one lineman as he lumbers to the front of the room. Kavanaugh puts the headset on Jehu Chesson, a receiver from St. Louis. His response is immediate. And loud.

"Oh, snap!

"Oh, my God!

"Pick, baby! *Ooooh*, go right there!"

When Chesson pulls off the headset he says, "Can I get some water? I'm thirsty."

"It's like he played or something," someone murmurs in the back.

Yes, it is. What Chesson watched was Headcase's demo reel, a two-minute-and-30-second mash-up

of almost three hours of footage filmed on Nov. 16, 2014, the day Oregon State shocked then No. 6 Arizona State 35–27 in Corvallis. Because Kavanaugh is a former OSU walk-on receiver, class of 2009, he had unfettered access to the Beavers' facilities and sideline that day, and the reel makes the viewer feel like part of the team. Hit PLAY, and suddenly you're in Oregon State's locker room for the pregame meeting, compelled to take a knee. Beavers coach Mike Riley (now at Nebraska) looks as if he's right in front of you; turn around and you see every member of the team. Chesson felt like one. He ran through the tunnel onto the field and sprinted up the sideline during a pick-six. When spectators rushed the field to celebrate, he instinctively recoiled to avoid being knocked over.

Defensive tackle Maurice Hurst Jr. takes his turn, and when he takes off the headset, he seems overwhelmed. "Man," he says, shaking his head. "And I thought Google Maps was cool."



"I thought it would be like Viewfinders, like when you were a little kid," Chesson says. "When you pull down [the lever] and—*click!*—the picture would change. What I just watched, that's mind-blowing stuff. You can feel the energy. It's like you're right there."

THE REALISM of VR, the authenticity that provokes an emotional response, is what Headcase and the Harbaughs are counting on when they debut the Michigan content in late September ("Day in the Life") and early November ("Game Day"). VR has burst into the mainstream in the past few months, popularized in online gaming communities and Oculus Rift, which Facebook purchased last year for \$2 billion. In a recent online chat Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg predicted that "immersive ex-



VR CAN HELP A SIGNAL-CALLER UNDERSTAND WHY A PLAY BROKE DOWN OR SEE WHO MISSED A BLOCK THAT LED TO A SACK. IN THE FUTURE, BELCH BELIEVES, COLLEGE FRESHMEN AND NFL ROOKIES WILL BE HANDED A HEADSET, NOT AN IPAD.

periences like virtual reality will become the norm.” Instead of just telling friends about your trip to Africa, you’ll hand them a headset and let them experience it for themselves. Peter Rubin of *Wired* magazine, who has written extensively about the medium, anticipates that in the next decade VR will be “part of our everyday fabric.

“An explosion of experimentation is fueling this,” Rubin says. “It’s just going to get more and more wondrous. The next two years are going to be remarkable for sports and VR.”

At the NFL combine in February, former Stanford kicker Derek Belch debuted STRIVR, which is designed to enhance game-film study and specifically to help train quarterbacks. The product, devised by Belch and Stanford Department of Communication professor Jeremy Bailenson with financial backing

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THE REAL FEEL
Kavanaugh (filming at LSU, left) created VR content that wowed the Michigan players (above). “It’s like you’re right there,” said one.

from Cardinal coach David Shaw, allows quarterbacks to put on a headset and relive games they just played.

While VR won’t replace watching film just yet—the headsets are too heavy and awkward to wear for long stretches, and some people feel nauseated when viewing anything in 3D—it can help a signal-caller understand why a play broke down or see who missed a block that led to a sack. It can create empathy, too. With VR, a coach who berated his quarterback about missing a receiver can put on the headset and understand, *Oh, that’s what you see in this play call.*

In the future, Belch believes, college freshmen and NFL rookies will be handed a headset, not an iPad, to memorize the playbook. VR can be especially helpful in college, where the NCAA continually cracks down on contact hours. STRIVR already counts Stanford, Arkansas, Auburn, Clemson, Dartmouth, Rice and Vanderbilt as clients, as well as the Dallas Cowboys, the 49ers and the Vikings. Headcase, in contrast, is working exclusively with Michigan for the 2015 season, though it’s been contacted by a handful of other Power Five schools. While STRIVR is not the only VR training tool available, Belch believes the company stands apart because he, as a former player, understands what coaches need to communicate and teach.

STRIVR immerses the viewer in a real-body situation, while other VR training tools, such as EON Sports, use video-game graphics. The latter can be interactive; for instance, coaches can move “players” around to simulate different situations. But nothing compares with the sensation of being

immersed in a game. A STRIVR viewer puts on the headset and feels as if he is taking a snap; the user can turn around and practically touch an offensive lineman, or look behind and find the running back.

“The invention of Avid [video-editing technology] about 30 years ago, which computerized the game—[that’s exactly how I felt] when I first saw virtual reality,” says Arkansas coach Bret Bielema. “I think it’s going to train younger players a lot faster. They can go watch a 30-play clip on virtual reality, sit in a room on a chair, and it would be the equivalent of going out and going through those 30 plays.”

Most VR content is shot using GoPro cameras, but those devices aren’t designed for immersive events. Mounting and shooting with multiple GoPros creates the 360 effect, but because GoPros can’t be synced, images still have to be stitched together manually, a long and tedious process. Belch would not give details on STRIVR’s solution to this issue, but he says the company found a way to “streamline” those steps.

VIDEO QUALITY is what Headcase hopes will separate it from other VR companies. Instead of focusing on VR as a training tool, which is useful to only a small percentage of the population, Headcase intends to use it as a storytelling platform accessible to recruits, families and fans. “We’re not doing this for insiders,” says Headcase cocreator Lucas Foster. “We’re trying to do this for regular people.”

First, Headcase had to build a camera. The company was mostly the brainchild of Kavanaugh, but Foster, a longtime Hollywood producer of movies such as *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, *Man on Fire* and *Law Abiding Citizen*, opens doors in Hollywood. In collaboration with L.A. camera house Radiant Images, Headcase created a mobile rig with 17 high-end cinema cameras assembled in a 360-degree display. Several of these cameras were used to shoot *Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation*.

As Headcase cocreator Jim Langlois, who has a background in Hollywood producing and editing, likes to say, “There’s only one R2D2.” And there are only so many people who know how to put him together. The Headcase rig—which runs on a \$2,000 wheelchair base bought from a retirement home in Los Angeles and is operated by an Xbox controller—weighs about 175 pounds and breaks down into 24 boxes, including monitors, wireless screens and cords. With

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SCREEN TIME
The STRIVR system, demonstrated here by Derek Belch’s brother Danny, was specifically designed to help train quarterbacks.



a crew of two, it takes one full day to assemble. It’s worth \$750,000, about four times the cost of a standard Hollywood camera. Headcase is working on ways to shrink the camera and mount it on a person. (Foster jokes that he is on the prowl for very short retired jockeys.) A popular rental in Hollywood, the rig has been used to shoot a Chevy commercial and a Comic-Con VR experience for FX’s show *The Strain*. Shooting content with it is “like having eyes in the back of your head,” Foster says.

The coolest part of any good VR product might be this: Because of a viewer’s complete immersion and ability to choose his own path, “you never watch a piece of content the same way twice,” Foster says. “It’s unrepeatable. After a while [rewatching movies] gets stale; here it never gets stale. There’s an act of discovery there that gives you a little chill.”

Sports are a natural VR guinea pig because they’re great theater. “If you’re a sports fan and you love Michigan football, and if we can make you feel like you’re a part of it, why would you leave?” Foster says. “It’s addictive reality, not just immersive.” Though tech enthusiasts have been experimenting with 360-degree viewing since the 1950s, for decades there have been only three VR success stories: military training, phobia desensitization, and education, in areas such as surgical training. Bailenson, who has been studying VR since the late 1990s, says sports have always been “the holy grail of VR,” but until recently the technology wasn’t advanced enough.

The medium remains in its infancy, though, and Foster says that from a Hollywood perspective it’s nowhere near ready for full-length feature films. But

SI.COM

To watch a video demonstrating current VR technology and its sports applications, go to SI.com/college-football



A VIEWER'S COMPLETE IMMERSION AND ABILITY TO CHOOSE HIS OWN PATH IN VIRTUAL REALITY MEANS THAT "YOU NEVER WATCH A PIECE OF CONTENT THE SAME WAY TWICE," SAYS FOSTER. "IT NEVER GETS STALE."

Foster has a special interest in what VR can do for Michigan football: His two oldest daughters, Megan and Ali, are a Michigan graduate and student, respectively. "I didn't understand when I sent them off to college that I was joining a cult," Foster says. "I've stood in the bleachers and swayed back and forth, I've sung 'You Suck!' and it's been really fun. But now I'm really excited about getting to see that from a player's point of view. And I'm interested in architecting that story for other people to experience."

It's not lost on Foster that his cool factor at home has gone up exponentially since taking this side gig. Ali Foster grew up on movie sets, sharing space and conversations with the likes of Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and Denzel Washington, but when her dad visited UM in April and texted Ali a photo of Jim Harbaugh's office, she flipped out, peppering him with questions about what and who he saw and whether he could get autographs and game tickets for her. "Suddenly I'm a rock star to her," he says, rolling his eyes.

JIM HARBAUGH, a staunch traditionalist, believes that regardless of how the message is delivered or what technology is used, prospects will always pick a school based on the ABC's: Academics, Ball and Campus. "There's no bad time to see Michigan," he says, "and no bad way to see Michigan." Come September there will just be one more way to experience it.

Imagine that a prospect is on campus in January for an official visit and he walks into the Big House. The frigid temperature distracts him from coaches who are trying to describe what the stadium will be like on a Saturday in the fall. But hand him a headset, and he'll experience it firsthand, cold weather forgotten. Or say the hypothetical prospect is from Hawaii, and his grandmother, one of the most influential people in his decision, couldn't make the trip to Ann Arbor. During the home visit Harbaugh could hand her a headset and say, "Here. This is what it'll be like for him."

"In recruiting, a lot of times we're stuck in Imagination World," Jay Harbaugh says. "With VR, instead of just saying, 'Hey, this is our team meeting room; imagine what it's like when it's full,' you get a chance to take things out of the fantasy realm and let the kids see and feel, to some degree, what life would be like as a Wolverine."

Back in the Michigan team meeting in mid-June, players start to envision a new recruiting reality. They suggest that the rig get up close and personal for fall-camp trash talk, and they predict that high school boys will enjoy immersing themselves in a postgame reality in which female students compliment them and invite them out for the evening. "Pretty girls, that's what gets the recruit!" someone yells. (Chesson, a senior, astutely adds, "Uh, but maybe we don't show that part to the moms.") The other hot topic: The possibilities of VR and *Call of Duty*. Hurst, the defensive tackle, offers this: "The camera could be next to me during sprints and watch me throw up in three-dimension." When teammates snicker, Hurst mutters, "Hey, it's supposed to be realistic."

Any high-quality VR takes deep pockets. Belch and Kavanaugh both declined to give specifics on how much their systems cost, saying it varies based on what each client needs. Michigan's package includes 12 customized headsets, which retail for around \$200 apiece. But this is just a glimpse of the future.

"VR, it's like the birth of television," Foster says. "It's a completely new way to express stories. I don't think people really understand what's about to happen." □

CF15 RACE TO NEW YORK

BY / ZAC ELLIS

SECOND TIER



Trevone Boykin
QB *TCU*

He's fresh off setting single-season school records for passing yards (3,901) and touchdown passes (33).



Nick Chubb
RB *Georgia*

Now the Dawgs' featured back, Chubb romped for 1,547 yards and 14 TDs in reserve duty as a freshman in '14.



Ezekiel Elliott
RB *Ohio State*

He reeled off 696 yards and eight scores in the Big Ten title game, Sugar Bowl and national championship.



DeShaun Watson
QB *Clemson*

Limited by injury as a freshman, a healthy Watson (1,466 yards, 14 TDs in '14) should carry the ACC-favorite Tigers.



Quarterback
Ohio State

Either J.T. Barrett or Cardale Jones will inherit the spotlight and the reins of the No. 1 team in the country.

LONG SHOTS



Joey Bosa
DE *Ohio State*

He led the Big Ten in tackles for loss (21) and sacks (13½) and should again lead OSU's driven defense.



Taysom Hill
QB *BYU*

The dual-threat passer suffered a broken left leg in '14 but returns as an electric star with big games on his slate.



Samaje Perine
RB *Oklahoma*

Last season's Big 12 offensive newcomer of the year, he set an FBS single-game record with 427 rushing yards against Kansas.



Justin Thomas
QB *Georgia Tech*

The legs behind the Jackets' triple-option offense rushed for 1,086 yards last fall, the most by a Tech QB in a season.



Scooby Wright
LB *Arizona*

A repeat of his video-game-like numbers (163 tackles, 29 TFLs, 14 sacks) could make him a finalist.

CHARLES BAUS/CSM/LANDOV (COOK ACTION); CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES (BOYKIN); GRANT HALVERSON/GETTY IMAGES (CHUBB); KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES (ELLIOTT); RICHARD SHIRO/AP (WATSON); LEON HALIP/GETTY IMAGES (COOK); STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES (FOURNETTE); BUTCH DILL/AP (HENRY); STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES (JOHNSON); SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PRESCOTT); CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES (WRIGHT); GERRY BROOME/AP (THOMAS); SUE OGROCKI/AP (PERINE); CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (HILL); JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES (BOSA)



Winning the Heisman takes more than good stats—you also need to play great on big stages. These are the 15 to watch in '15

FAVORITES



Connor Cook (left)
QB *Michigan State*

NFL teams are already drooling over Cook, a tough-nosed, accurate passer who gets to stand behind one of the country's top O-lines as a senior.



Leonard Fournette
RB *LSU*

Fournette capped his 1,034-yard freshman campaign with a 143-yard, two-touchdown performance against Notre Dame in the Music City Bowl.



Derrick Henry
RB *Alabama*

The Tide's uncertain QB situation could lead coordinator Lane Kiffin to lean on the 6' 3" Henry, who rumbled for 990 yards and 11 scores last year.



Jeremy Johnson
QB *Auburn*

The Tigers' new starter is a 6' 5", 240-pound dual threat who brings better passing skills to the high-output offense of an SEC favorite.



Dak Prescott
QB *Mississippi State*

Prescott finished eighth in Heisman balloting in '14 and spurned the NFL for his senior season, during which he'll lead a green lineup.



SCOUT REPORT

COTTON BOWL

Year One of the College Football Playoff went rather well. Ohio State, a team that lost early but appeared to be playing the best, most-dynamic football at season's end, got a chance to prove its mettle on the field, which the Buckeyes did by beating Alabama and Oregon. The new system brought with it a selection committee that was free enough to drop undefeated FSU to third in the rankings, which was the right move (the Seminoles often looked shaky) but would have been unthinkable under the BCS. That's how it's *supposed* to work, right?

Sort of. Baylor and TCU were one-loss teams, like

PROJECTED

SEC East

1. Georgia
2. Missouri
3. Tennessee
4. Florida
5. South Carolina
6. Kentucky
7. Vanderbilt

West

1. Auburn
2. Alabama
3. Ole Miss
4. Arkansas
5. LSU
6. Mississippi State
7. Texas A&M

ACC Atlantic

1. Florida State
2. Clemson
3. Louisville
4. N.C. State
5. Boston College
6. Wake Forest
7. Syracuse

Coastal

1. Georgia Tech
2. Virginia Tech
3. Pittsburgh
4. Duke
5. Miami
6. North Carolina
7. Virginia

BIG 12

1. TCU
2. Baylor
3. Oklahoma
4. Oklahoma State
5. West Virginia
6. Kansas State
7. Texas
8. Texas Tech
9. Iowa State
10. Kansas

JOE ROBINS/GETTY IMAGES (OHIO STATE); DALE ZANINE/USA TODAY SPORTS (AUBURN); KEVIN JAJRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS (TCU); TODD ROSENBERG FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (NOTRE DAME)

ATING ORTS

2.

AUBURN



ORANGE BOWL

3.

TCU

three of the four who made the playoff, yet neither Big 12 power was given a shot. This didn't feel quite right, but the reality is that someone is always going to be left out. Even in an eight-team bracket—an expansion many see as inevitable—there will be little difference between, and much debate about, who's No. 8 and who's No. 9. But the debate is key: It reflects possibility and passion. It gives the regular season meaning. It makes early-August predictions about the Top 25 teams and the four-team playoff field a spark for study and discussion (and maybe even ridicule). Let the arguments begin.

STANDINGS

BIG TEN East

1. Ohio State
2. Michigan State
3. Penn State
4. Michigan
5. Maryland
6. Rutgers
7. Indiana

West

1. Wisconsin
2. Nebraska
3. Minnesota
4. Iowa
5. Northwestern
6. Illinois
7. Purdue

PAC 12 North

1. Oregon
2. Stanford
3. Washington
4. California
5. Washington State
6. Oregon State

South

1. USC
2. UCLA
3. Arizona
4. Arizona State
5. Utah
6. Colorado

SI.COM

Read about this year's impact transfers, freshmen to watch and playoff-shaping games, as well as conference-by-conference breakdowns and our preseason All-America team, beginning on Aug. 6 at SI.com/college-football

01.

OHIO
STATE

BY / PETE THAMEL



TOSS UP

The nation's knottiest quarterback competition gained some clarity on July 23, when senior Braxton Miller revealed he's moving to H-back—a hybrid receiver position. That still leaves Ohio State with the most enviable and intriguing QB race, between sophomore J.T. Barrett and junior Cardale Jones.

Each has established his credentials with a different style. Barrett went 11–1 as a starter last year, finished No. 5 in the Heisman voting and broke Drew Brees's 16-year-old Big Ten record by accounting for 45 touchdowns. At 6' 2" and 255 pounds, Barrett is as much a deft distributor as a dynamic playmaker. His fractured right ankle in the regular-season finale allowed Jones to step in and lead OSU to victories over Wisconsin in the Big Ten title game, then Alabama and Oregon in the College Football Playoff. Along the way he established himself as an NFL prospect,

▼▼▼
SCHEDULE
ANALYSIS

Each of Urban Meyer's three national-title teams lost at least one game. A defeat this year could be dire, though, because he has few chances for résumé-building wins. The Buckeyes' only rigorous nonconference game is the opener at Virginia Tech; they could be three-TD picks in all their league road games (Indiana, Rutgers, Illinois and Michigan). A Nov. 21 date with MSU could be the de facto Big Ten title game.

in three postseason games. Four starters return on the offensive line—known as the Slobs—including a top NFL prospect in senior tackle Taylor Decker (6' 8", 315). The Slobs are no slouches: OSU averaged 6.2 yards per carry in the postseason.

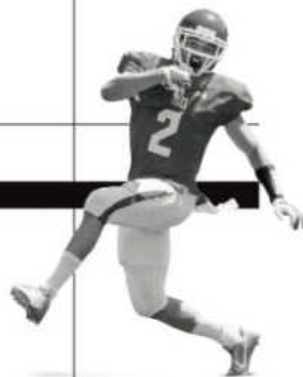
The country's scariest rush duo highlights the defense; potential No. 1 pick Joey Bosa (a junior) and hybrid linebacker Darron Lee (sophomore) combined for 37½ TFLs last season. (Bosa and three other players have been suspended for the opener for a violation of team policy.) Expect to see Lee and senior linebacker Joshua Perry (8½ TFLs) in opposing backfields frequently, as OSU will blitz more this year.

Last year's title came a year ahead of schedule for the Buckeyes, but don't expect them to fall out of national contention soon. They currently have the No. 1-ranked recruiting classes for 2016 and '17. □

a 6' 5", 250-pound drop-back archetype.

So who'll be throwing bubble screens to Miller? The safe bet is Barrett. Coach Urban Meyer's best offenses have featured horizontal quarterback runs more suited to the nimble Barrett than the lumbering Jones. Receiver Devin Smith's departure to the NFL also hurts Jones, as the Buckeyes have no vertical threat to complement his biggest strength: the deep ball.

Ezekiel Elliott, a junior tailback, returns after breaking out for 696 rushing yards in



▼▼▼
X-FACTOR

In 2013, his senior year at Cleveland's Glenville High, corner **Marshon Lattimore** sealed a win by blocking a field goal with a leap so high that his thighs were even with teammates' helmets. "One of the freakiest athletes I've coached," says Glenville coach Ted Ginn Sr. The 6-foot, 195-pound Lattimore, a top 50 recruit, should announce his presence in the secondary after surgery on his hamstring last August wiped out his freshman year. The starting spot opposite sophomore Eli Apple is sophomore Gareon Conley's for now, but Lattimore may rise up during camp and snare it.

JEFF HAYNES FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ELLIOTT); SCOTT W. GRAU/CON SPORTSMAN (LATTIMORE); ROBIN ALAM/CON SPORTSMAN (LEE)



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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

They lived off their defensive line last season—they could rush four and still pressure the quarterback. That helped prevent deep throws against a susceptible secondary with average corners and stiff safeties. . . . They aren't that complicated on defense, where they let their playmakers be playmakers. To attack them you have to be physical up front, protect the quarterback and take chunks of yards. . . . Joey Bosa is a headache when he flips from left to right end, especially with **Darron Lee** rushing from the opposite side. Lee may be the best rush linebacker in the country, and they move them around to create mismatches. . . . It'll be interesting how Urban Meyer handles the quarterbacks, because he wants everyone to be happy. I think J.T. Barrett is more well-rounded. . . . Of course when you have the offensive line they have, you don't need a great thrower. You just need someone to hand it off.



02.

AUBURN

◆ BY / ZAC ELLIS



SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

A win over Louisville in the opener in Atlanta is a must if the Tigers want to gain playoff consideration. The SEC West slate brings LSU in Death Valley on Sept. 19, then comes a home game versus Mississippi State and road matchups with improved Arkansas (Oct. 24) and Texas A&M (Nov. 7). At the end (Nov. 28), Alabama comes to the Plains, and the home team has won the last three.

ton's or Marshall's class as a rushing threat, but, says Malzahn, "he probably runs a 4.6."

Johnson takes over an offense that mixes experience and potential. Seven starters return, including versatile junior Avery Young and three others on the offensive line. Junior Jovon Robinson—this year's top-ranked juco recruit—and sophomore Roc Thomas look to take over a ground attack that finished second in the SEC (5.5 yards per carry). Senior receiver Duke Williams

(45 catches for 730 yards) gives Johnson an explosive weapon on the edge.

Auburn's defense couldn't keep up with its offense—or anyone's—last season, finishing ninth or worse in the conference in nine of 10 major categories. Malzahn is counting on new coordinator Will Muschamp to turn the unit around.

Muschamp inherits six returning starters, including the top three tacklers: senior linebackers Cassanova McKinzy and Kris Frost, who form a stout duo in the middle, and junior safety Johnathan Ford, who should lead the secondary. Ford will be joined by Georgia transfer Tray Matthews, a sophomore, on the back end, where the Tigers must improve dramatically: They allowed 7.1 yards per pass attempt—11th in the SEC—in 2014. □

X-FACTOR

Defensive end Carl Lawson had a stellar freshman season in 2013 (7½ tackles for a loss and four sacks), but he tore his left ACL the following spring. Without him the Tigers' pass rush and run stopping struggled in 2014. They finished 11th in the SEC in sacks (21) and yards-per-carry allowed (4.45). After a year of rehab, Lawson says he's now healthier than ever: During the spring he clocked his fastest 10-yard split in the 40. Says coach Gus Malzahn, "He's the same player he was before he got hurt." Malzahn and the rest of the Tigers certainly hope so.

ARMED AND READY

The last highly touted, 6' 5"-plus quarterback to stroll onto Auburn's campus won both the Heisman Trophy and the national championship in 2010. So perhaps the comparison with Cam Newton isn't fair to junior **Jeremy Johnson**, who has made only two starts on the Plains. "Cam is Cam, and not me," Johnson says. "I don't compare myself to Cam that much."

Still, it's hard to ignore the Cam-like hype around Johnson, a Montgomery, Ala., native who is the primary reason the Tigers should return to playoff contention. Johnson spent the last two years as Nick Marshall's backup, learning coach Gus Malzahn's hurry-up system. His superior arm strength and accuracy will allow Auburn to pass the ball more while keeping the read option open. Johnson may not be in New-



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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

They've got the best offensive line in the SEC. They're big, they're physical, they move people, they do a good job on double teams. . . . With Jeremy Johnson at quarterback, there may not be as many quarterback runs, but from a formation standpoint, it'll be the same thing. You'll still have to play your eight-man fronts to stop the running game. . . . Jeremy is a bit more of a quarterback. They're going to probably have more of a passing game, with play-action off the running game. That will end up bringing a different dimension to their offense. . . . Obviously their No. 1 receiver, **Duke Williams**, is going to have some big gains because you have to bring eight guys up. . . . They have a talented group of backs. They're really a two-back offense that likes to run and throw it deep. . . . They do have issues in the secondary, but Will [Muschamp] makes an offense beat him lefthanded—he takes away the things an O does well and makes it hard to score.

03. TCU

BY / LINDSAY SCHNELL



SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

The Horned Frogs want to talk only about Minnesota, and for good reason: That's no cupcake opener in Minneapolis. Survive that, and the next daunting date isn't until Nov. 21 at Oklahoma, followed by a visit from Baylor to end the season. One trap: West Virginia, Oct. 29 in Fort Worth. The Mountaineers took the Horned Frogs to overtime in 2012 and '13 and lost a 31-30 heartbreaker last year.

attitude and swag" to the offense, and Patterson notes that Air Raid attacks like the Horned Frogs' often hit "another level" in the second season. Returning senior receivers **Josh Doctson** (a school-record 1,018 yards on 65 catches, 11 for TDs) and Kolby Listenbee (41 catches for 753 yards), plus senior running back Aaron Green (7.1 yards per carry) and Shaun Nixon (back after missing his freshman year with right ACL tear), will provide plenty of support.

In a twist for TCU, it's the defense that's an unknown. The Horned Frogs lost their leaders in tackles and interceptions from a unit that was first in the Big 12 in total D, allowing 341.8 yards per game. Patterson praises the football IQ of his new linebackers—junior Sammy Douglas and freshman Mike Freeze—who are faster than last season's duo. Three linemen return, including 6' 3", 248-pound senior defensive end James McFarland, who led the team with seven sacks. "We've got a lot of questions that need to be answered," McFarland says. "We have the potential to be faster [everywhere] and more physical up front. Or we could be not that good."

As for early talk that TCU should make the playoff, Patterson has a response: Last season was about proving people wrong. In 2015 it's about proving them right. □

X-FACTOR

He hasn't played in a real game since 2013, dislocating his shoulder after his junior year at Graham (Texas) High, but freshman **Mike Freeze** is already slated to start at linebacker. A converted safety, the 6' 3", 220-pound three-star recruit has the size to match up with and bring down ballcarriers, but it's his speed that stands out. He'll need the versatility as he attempts to fit into the Horned Frogs' 4-2-5 scheme and replace Paul Dawson, the Big 12 defensive player of the year, who wound up as a third-round pick of the Bengals.

The O in Horned Frog

The defense has holes, but coach Gary Patterson waves away such concerns. "Last year we didn't have any linebackers, we didn't have a quarterback," he says of the conventional wisdom. "This year I've got to replace six starters on defense." Everyone's got pieces to find and plug in, he figures. But most teams don't get to rebuild around an offense packed with playmakers, including a senior QB who's a Heisman candidate.

Co-offensive coordinators Doug Meacham and Sonny Cumbie arrived in Fort Worth last season and promptly turned Trevone Boykin, a former receiver, into a dual-threat dynamo. Now the 6' 2", 205-pound Boykin will look to improve on a year in which he passed for a school-record 3,901 yards, rushed for 707 and accounted for 42 touchdowns. Boykin says Cumbie and Meacham brought "an



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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

They're as explosive and aggressive on offense as any team in the country. You're more likely to beat them in a shootout, the way Baylor did last season, than you are to shut them down. . . . The key—obviously—is slowing down **Trevone Boykin**. You've got to keep him off-balance and put him in predictable situations like second-and-11 and third-and-six. You let him get ahead of the chains with all the weapons he has at his disposal, and good luck, especially with their play-calling creativity. . . . When you've got the ball, you have to be just as aggressive as they are. Gary Patterson's smart about his 4-2-5 defense, but he has to rebuild this season's unit, particularly in the back seven. When you get in the red zone, you better score touchdowns because their offense certainly will. . . . Remember, their last loss was in early October [to Baylor], so they've got a ton of momentum. They've always played with a lot of energy, and to a certain degree they're fearless.





04.

NOTRE DAME

BY / BRIAN HAMILTON



SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

The slate features nine Power Five opponents and is designed to appeal to the selection committee, but it appears more strenuous than it is. Only four dates—home to Georgia Tech (Sept. 19), at Clemson (Oct. 3), home to USC (Oct. 17) and a season-ending trip to Stanford (Nov. 28)—are against true Top 25 foes. One potential trap: a home game against Navy's triple option that comes between the Tigers and the Trojans.

the NFL draft—brings 68 combined starts to the field. Stanley & Co. helped rack up 263 rushing yards in December's Music City Bowl win over LSU. That far outpaced the team's season average (159.5) and doubled as an epiphany. "It happened because everyone really wanted it to happen," Stanley says. "You see all the yards you get when everyone does their job right. And it becomes an addiction."

A banged-up defense surrendered 31.7 points per game over the last

seven, but young backups gained experience, and now coordinator Brian VanGorder's aggressive system can go deeper. "It gives us options and the ability to move guys around," says Schmidt, who broke his left ankle on Nov. 1 but is fully recovered. One of the most versatile pieces is junior All-America linebacker **Jaylon Smith** (112 tackles), another potential first-rounder. It would help if at least one of the seven returning defensive linemen, who combined for only 12 sacks last year, joined the group of playmakers.

Everett Golson's transfer to Florida State cinched the ascension of Zaire, who's a read-option threat as well as a skilled passer; he tossed a 68-yard touchdown in the spring game. Should it all come together, the Irish will be good enough to take the words out of their quarterback's mouth. □

X-FACTOR

Is C.J. Prosise a receiver?
Is the 6-foot, 220-pound senior a tailback?
Notre Dame's answer: Yes and yes. Prosise averaged a team-best 17.8 yards on 29 catches as a slot receiver in 2014. He then ran for a 50-yard touchdown in the Music City Bowl, one of his four plays of 50-plus yards last year, and he had more spring game carries (12 for 64 yards) than any other running back. Prosise will work primarily as a complement to starter Tarean Folston, a 5' 9", 214-pound junior, but Prosise's flexibility and explosiveness can vex any defense that thinks it knows what's coming.

ARMED AND READY

Malik Zaire has thrown 35 passes as a Notre Dame quarterback. He nevertheless has a catchphrase: Third and long—not long enough. He first recited it in the huddle during a 35-point loss at USC last November, the Irish's fourth straight defeat to end 2014. The meaning: There is no amount of yardage the offense can't gain. "Whenever it's an opportunity for us to take that next step," Zaire says, "we can do that."

The 18 returning starters learned a lot from last year's nosedive, and they're eager to put that hard-earned knowledge to use. Says fifth-year linebacker Joe Schmidt, "I've maybe never been on a team where I've been as excited as I am about this season."

A line anchored by 6' 6", 315-pound senior left tackle Ronnie Stanley—a potential No. 1 pick in

RICK SCUTER/AP (SMITH); ANDY LVONIS/GETTY IMAGES (PROSISE); GREG MCWILLIAMS/ICON SPORTSWARE (ZAIRE)



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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

If quarterback **Malik Zaire** is accepted by teammates, and there isn't any lingering effect from Everett Golson's leaving, that will be key. Golson was probably a better runner, but Malik is a better passer. . . . Ronnie Stanley is a legitimate pass protector at left tackle. He's a long-armed guy, he's got good knee bend, and he's the best athlete on that front group. . . . At some points running back Tarean Folston was able to get his pads down and become a difficult target at the second and third level. I don't know that he's a home run hitter, but he should be a 1,000-yard rusher. . . . Receiver Will Fuller runs good routes; he's got good hands. He will attempt to block. . . . Cornerback KeiVarae Russell has good hips, good feet. He's got explosive movement and good body control. My biggest concern would be the safeties. They played a good amount, but they weren't particularly good.



05.

ALABAMA

◆ BY / ANDY STAPLES



SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

The Tide get four opponents coming off byes, including three in a row starting on Oct. 17 (at Texas A&M, Tennessee, LSU). That run against tough SEC teams with fresh legs comes after a couple of ground-and-pound matchups: at Georgia on Oct. 3, Arkansas on Oct. 10. The season ends with hard trips to Mississippi State and Auburn, sandwiched around Charleston Southern at home.

Whoever runs the offense, he'll have to operate quickly and decisively: In their first year under coordinator Lane Kiffin, the Tide averaged 9.2 more plays than in 2013. The QB's job will be made easier by a one-two wallop of running backs in junior **Derrick Henry** (6' 3", 242 pounds) and senior speedster Kenyan Drake (4.4 in the 40). The line is anchored by sophomore left tackle Cam Robinson (6' 6", 326 pounds), who's one of two Outland Award contenders in Tuscaloosa with senior center Ryan Kelly.

The defense allowed only 3.2 yards a rush last season, and a deep front led by 6' 4", 312-pound junior A'Shawn Robinson should keep that number low. Improvements to a pass rush that finished 60th in sacks per game (2.2) will help a secondary that has lagged; in the Tide's Sugar Bowl loss, Ohio State completed third-and-long passes of 26, 26, 40 and 47 yards. Shifting junior Eddie Jackson from corner to safety will help against the spread. □

X-FACTOR

Last year Lane Kiffin ran the offense through receiver Amari Cooper; the most likely candidate to fill Cooper's spot is **Robert Foster**, a 6' 2", 194-pound sophomore. Foster, who had just six catches for 44 yards, can't hope to match the All-America's record-breaking production. But he must keep defenses from packing the box to stuff the run; that will open up the field for whichever quarterback emerges.

SABAN'S CHOICE

For the second consecutive season Alabama enters camp with a quarterback competition. Senior Jake Coker, the Florida State transfer, will try to fend off freshman David Cornwell, a highly regarded drop-back passer. Coach Nick Saban has offered no timetable for a decision, so the winner might not be known until the first game.

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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

Their front seven is, hands down, the best in the country. You have to get creative against them, because they're so hard to move. . . . They were young last year on the back end. That's where you could take advantage. But look at [cornerback] Tony Brown—they were playing him as a true freshman. With the coaching he'll get, you know he's going to be good. . . . They've done a good job of recruiting to defend every type of offense. If you want to put 10 tight ends in the game, they can match that. If you want to spread it out, they can match that. . . . You don't know who the quarterback is going to be or how they will replace Amari Cooper, but what gets overlooked is that offensive line. That line means they're going to have great backs.

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X-FACTOR

Junior defensive tackle **Andrew Billings** (6' 2", 300 pounds) is one of the most disruptive interior linemen in the Big 12: Last year he had 11½ tackles for a loss and nine quarterback hurries. By drawing double teams and flushing the pocket, Billings makes the other Bears up front—especially Shawn Oakman—more dangerous.



06. BAYLOR

◆ BY / LINDSAY SCHNELL



RED FLAG, YELLOW FLAGS

The Bears bring back plenty of playmakers from the No. 1 offense in the nation last season: sophomore receiver KD Cannon (58 catches for 1,030 yards and eight TDs), senior wideout Jay Lee (15.4 yards per reception) and junior running back Shock Linwood (1,252 yards and 16 TDs on 251 carries). They're also introducing a whole new dimension in 6' 7", 392-pound tight end LaQuan McGowan (*page 48*), who coach Art Briles points out has "slimmed down." The unknown is at quarterback, where junior Seth Russell takes over for two-year starter Bryce Petty. The Baylor staff is still "trying to figure out how to coach, how to motivate Russell," Briles says, but he's got a big arm, and his speed will add another layer to the Bears' high-speed, spread-the-field attack.

With the departure of leading tackler Bryce Hager, sophomore linebacker Taylor Young (92 tackles) will have to take on a bigger role. Briles loves his defensive line, led by 6' 9", 280-pound senior end **Shawn Oakman**, a 2014 All-America who has 13 career sacks. One clear target for improvement? While the Bears led the country with 581.5 yards per game on offense, they also set the pace with 127 total penalties for 1,149 yards. □

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SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

West Virginia, the only Big 12 school to beat Baylor last year, hits Waco on Oct. 17, but the real action starts in November: at Kansas State, Oklahoma at home, at Oklahoma State and at TCU in a Black Friday rematch of last year's 61-58 thriller. The nonconference slate (SMU, Lamar and Rice) is toothless, but the Bears believe that by going 12-0, they'll get into the playoff.

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OPPOSING COACHES TAKE

Most teams don't have the secondary to keep up with them, so the key is to not give them a lot of space. Teams that have had success against them have been able to disrupt their receivers' timing at the line of scrimmage and pressure the quarterback. . . . They do a lot of passing off a run game that is very difficult to defend, especially when you're trying to slow it down with a minimum number of people in the box. . . . When you attack their defense with the run, they're going to man you up on the corners and dare you to win one-on-one battles over the top, so you better have guys who can do that. It helps to have a running back with some wiggle who can make them miss, too. . . . If you get into a shootout with them, you better force some turnovers.

07.

MICHIGAN STATE

◆ BY / BRIAN HAMILTON



SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

A high-impact visit from Oregon on Sept. 12 won't determine whether the Spartans are a playoff contender—but it will define the context of their season. Win, and they're a top five team. Lose, and the margin for error in Big Ten play is zero, with road games at Michigan, Nebraska and OSU. That Nov. 21 tilt with the Buckeyes screams playoff play-in.

reminded them they had failed to accomplish their goals. "What we hang on to," says senior defensive end **Shilique Calhoun** of his team's motivation, "is losing."

The reality? Michigan State is a team with top-shelf players and top-end consistency worthy of championship expectations. Senior quarterback Connor Cook, a potential first-rounder next April, has thrown 32 more touchdowns than interceptions the last two years. Tackle Jack Conklin, a 6' 6", 317-pound junior who could have been drafted in round 1 last spring, anchors a line that allowed only 11 sacks in 2014. Calhoun

also returned, to boost a defense that has allowed just 18.3 points per game since 2010.

For all its talent and reliability, Michigan State might still miss out on the playoff—its two defeats in 2014 were to the teams that played for the national title. "A lot of people give us credit right now," Dantonio says. "We have to reach higher." □

X-FACTOR

In a former life **Lawrence Thomas** was a four-star linebacker recruit. Now he's a 6' 4", 300-pound senior D-lineman who will shift between end and tackle depending on the personnel package. If Thomas can improve his sack numbers—he had three in '14—he can keep teams from sliding protection to Shilique Calhoun, much as now-graduated **Marcus Rush** did for the last three years.

LET THE CHIPS FALL

The Spartans have won 11 or more games in four of the last five seasons. Still, they treat success with wariness. Their workout shirts feature pictures of poker chips on the shoulders. (Get it?) Last season they finished fifth in the final polls after a 42–41 Cotton Bowl victory over Baylor; to open spring practice, coach Mark Dantonio

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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

Mark Dantonio is Iceman from *Top Gun*. He's precise and doesn't make many mistakes. They don't necessarily beat you, you beat yourself because they create so many disadvantages. . . . Connor Cook has so much poise and accuracy. He's valuable, but [center] Jack Allen is probably more so because he gets everybody where they need to be. They're not a huge vertical pass attack except on play-action, but they do that a ton because they run the ball so well. . . . The departure of [defensive coordinator] Pat Narduzzi will bring new wrinkles, but it's always been Dantonio's defense. Shilique Calhoun is one of the best. They play a quarters-type coverage to limit the pass, but with time your quarterback can pick them apart. Not many get that opportunity because their front four is ridiculous.

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X-FACTOR

If the Trojans hope to protect Cody Kessler and create some balance with the running game, they'll need a strong year from senior center **Max Tuerk** (6' 6", 285 pounds). A four-year starter who has played four positions on the line, he helped nurture a young unit last season—three freshman starters—that will be even stronger in 2015.



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SCHEDULE
ANALYSIS

The Pac-12 South is brutal, and the Trojans get three tough crossovers with a stiff nonconference game mixed in. First up, on Sept. 19 in L.A., is Stanford, which lost to USC 13-10 last year. Then on Thursday, Oct. 8, Steve Sarkisian's former team, Washington, pays a visit. USC travels to Notre Dame on Oct. 17 and to Oregon on Nov. 21. At least the finale against UCLA is in Memorial Coliseum.

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OPPOSING
COACH'S TAKE

Kessler is probably one of the most underrated players in college football. He throws deep really well and makes great checkdowns. He's not flashy, but he knows how to manipulate the offense. He might not win the Heisman, but shoot, he'll win games. He's a true quarterback. . . . Sark [Steve Sarkisian] is one of the better coaches in the country at finding weaknesses and exploiting them. Why attack 11 defenders when you can attack one or two? And it doesn't matter who's running or catching: If that experienced line gives Kessler time, you're in trouble. . . . Defensively, they've applied a lot of pressure the last couple of years. So when you're on offense, it doesn't matter if you're athletic; you have to play smashmouth. If you drop back every snap and give them time to come at you, they're going to cause a lot of problems.

08. USC

◆ BY / LINDSAY SCHNELL

COUNTING ON CODY

The Trojans' hopes begin and end with senior quarterback **Cody Kessler**, a Heisman candidate. Last year the 6' 1" 215-pounder completed a school-record 69.7% of his passes, throwing for 39 touchdowns with only five interceptions.

Kessler's primary target will be sophomore wideout JuJu Smith (54 catches for 724 yards and five touchdowns), while junior Darreus Rogers (21 catches, 245 yards, four TDs) will see a major uptick in opportunities. But the offense's secret weapon could be a defensive player: Adoree' Jackson, a 2014 freshman All-America cornerback who took a one-yard pass from Kessler and turned it into a 71-yard touchdown in USC's 45-42 Holiday Bowl win over Nebraska, will see more snaps at receiver. The Trojans lack their usual bumper crop of running backs, but whoever gets the nod—likely 6' 1", 195-pound junior Justin Davis—will work behind an experienced line.

Defensively, there are several holes to fill along the front seven after the departure of All-America end Leonard Williams and linebacker Hayes Pullard. Junior linebacker Su'a Cravens (17 TFLs, three INTs) is back, and in the secondary Jackson (10 pass breakups) will get support from 6' 2", 200-pound freshman corner Iman Marshall, USC's top-rated recruit. □



09.

FLORIDA STATE

◆ BY / ANDY STAPLES



THE IRISH ARE COMING

The offense was already in a major state of flux. The line has four new starters to break in. The receiving corps must replace Rashad Greene, who set almost every school record. The quarterback job is a battle between junior Sean Maguire and Everett Golson, a graduate transfer from Notre Dame.

Sophomore tailback Dalvin Cook—who led the

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

Though the front seven will get tested in a visit to Boston College (Sept. 18), the Noles can spend the first month trying out offensive and defensive combinations. That should prep them for a challenging three-week stretch starting Oct. 10: Miami, Louisville and at Georgia Tech. Then, on Nov. 7, FSU goes to Clemson for the de facto Atlantic Division title game.

Seminoles with 1,008 yards rushing in 2014, caught 22 passes and bailed them out of deficits against Louisville and Miami—was the lone sure thing. That was, until his arrest in July on a battery charge for hitting a woman outside a bar. (The arraignment is set for Sept. 2.) Cook was suspended indefinitely, and it's unclear whether he'll ever return to the team. That puts added pressure on backups Mario Pender, a junior whose career has been stalled by injuries, and Jacques Patrick, a 6' 1", 232-pound freshman.

If recruiting rankings are to be believed, FSU should be able to replace its 11 NFL draftees on both sides of the ball—but the youngsters will take time to get acclimated.

While junior **Jalen Ramsey**'s move from safety to corner will allow him to take away one side of the field, the rest of the relatively experienced secondary needs help from an inexperienced group of linebackers and linemen. By pressuring opposing quarterbacks, sophomore linebackers Lorenzo Featherston and Jacob Pugh can buy time as the D develops. □

X-FACTOR

Coach Jimbo Fisher's ace recruiting the past few years means that most blue-chippers have to wait their turn in Tallahassee. That probably won't be the case for **Derwin James**, a 6' 2", 212-pound freshman strong safety from Haines City (Fla.) High. Video has surfaced of James dusting teammates in 40-yard dashes, jumping over fully upright men and bench-pressing 405 pounds.

OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

They're so strong on the back end of their defense. They're not quite as strong as they used to be on the front, especially at the defensive end position, but those back four or five guys are elite. ... They go by the principle that the more talented you are, the less you have to do on defense. They're going to have more talent than 10 of the 12 teams they play every year, so they don't make it too complicated. ... They probably play a little bit more man than other teams we face because they have the guys who can do that. ... You've got to be able to run the ball, because you're not going to be able to drive by throwing exclusively. ... Their offense got better last year when they moved Cam Erving to center and started Rod Johnson at left tackle, but Erving is gone now. ... Their backs are great at breaking tackles.

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X-FACTOR

As a reserve in 2014, outside linebacker **Christian French** led the team in sacks (6½), even though the former tight end said he lacked confidence in his new role. If the 6' 5", 250-pound senior can find his swagger and apply pressure, Oregon will be able to cover its defensive weaknesses long enough to outscore opponents.



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SCHEDULE
ANALYSIS

A Week 2 trip to Michigan State is most likely a loss, but the Ducks will have time to get back in the playoff hunt—provided they don't stumble in Pac-12 play. Thursday nights can be weird in college football, so Oregon should be wary of an Oct. 29 visit to Arizona State. Back-to-back games in November—at Stanford and home against USC—will be decisive.

10. OREGON

◆ BY / LINDSAY SCHNELL

GETTING UP TO SPEED

Gone is Heisman-winning quarterback and three-year starter Marcus Mariota, and in his place steps . . . a graduate transfer from the FCS? Or a backup who has attempted 41 passes? If Vernon Adams, who threw for 10,438 yards and ran for 1,232 in three years at Eastern Washington, can quickly learn the playbook, the job is most likely his. The other option is junior Jeff Lockie, who has played garbage time for two years with the exception of one meaningful snap in the 2013 Alamo Bowl—which he fumbled.

Whoever runs the show won't have to do much besides take care of the ball. The running back duo of sophomore **Royce Freeman** (1,365 yards and 18 touchdowns) and junior Thomas Tyner (5.1 yards per carry) returns, as does junior receiver Bralon Addison, the team's top playmaker, who missed last season with a torn left ACL.

The Ducks will stick with their 3–4 and get a boost from the return of 6' 7", 290-pound senior DE DeForest Buckner (81 tackles, 13 TFLs in 2014), who had eyed the NFL. But they must replace three members of the secondary and are hoping the lone returnee, junior safety Reggie Daniels (83 tackles), and last year's key sub, sophomore corner Chris Seisay, can anchor a young group. □



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OPPOSING
COACH'S TAKE

It's crazy that defenses are sitting around right now hoping the next Oregon quarterback is good. Because if he's just good, not great like Marcus Mariota, it gives teams a chance. . . . Royce Freeman had a monster freshman season, and it was just a feeler year. . . .

Mark Helfrich is so good at finding what works, and then gashing you. You don't have time to adjust until the series is over, and the majority of times, they've scored. They have so many ways of attacking you; you have to be aware of everyone on the field. . . . Their pace isn't so foreign anymore. The teams that beat them get on the board early, find a way to possess the ball and make them play from behind. . . . We're going to find out how much of what they did was Mariota and how much was the system.

11.

GEORGIA

BY / ZAC ELLIS



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SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

A three-week stretch early on could seal the Bulldogs' fate in the SEC East. They travel to Tennessee on Oct. 10 before hosting two-time division champ Missouri, then face rival Florida in Jacksonville on Halloween. A win over Georgia Tech in the finale will be essential to offset an otherwise weak nonconference slate: Louisiana-Monroe, Southern and Georgia Southern.

the injured Todd Gurley; he's now the focal point of a backfield that includes a healthy Keith Marshall and Sony Michel.

Chubb's success persuaded new OC Brian Schottenheimer to keep Georgia's pro-style scheme. "We know the offense," senior tackle John Theus says. "It's just a matter of putting in the work." Theus and three other starters return on the line, and that experience should help the quarterback, who will emerge from a competition among redshirt sophomore Brice Ramsey and juniors Faton Bauta and Greyson Lambert, a transfer from Virginia.

The Bulldogs finished 17th in the nation in total

defense in 2014 but must improve, particularly on third down. Linebackers Leonard Floyd and Jordan Jenkins are the unquestioned leaders, and five-star freshman tackle Trenton Thompson should make an impact. "I expect the majority of guys will have a better sense of exactly what we want to get done," Richt says, "and how to get it done." □

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X-FACTOR

Jordan Jenkins, a senior outside linebacker, had 9½ tackles for loss and five sacks in 2014 while leading the Bulldogs with 24 QB pressures. Jenkins spurned a shot at the NFL to make a bigger impact in Jeremy Pruitt's system, which allows him to bounce around the front seven and lets other playmakers—such as fellow outside 'backers Lorenzo Carter and Leonard Floyd—get on the field at the same time.

BACK ON TRACK

Georgia coach Mark Richt hasn't won an SEC title since 2005, and in his 15th season in Athens he'll have to integrate a new offensive coordinator and overcome uncertainty at quarterback. At least he has **Nick Chubb**. As a true freshman last season the 5' 10", 220-pound Chubb rushed for 1,547 yards and 14 touchdowns in place of

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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

Brian Schottenheimer is going to be great for them. There's no substitute for coaching pro football and having to deal with young quarterbacks, and they have to find and develop a quarterback this season. . . . They're going to have two of the top five running backs [Nick Chubb and Sony Michel] when they both come out in the draft. I'm not sure Chubb has the same home run speed that Todd Gurley had, but he's so hard to wrap up and tackle. . . . They play two-back or three-wide, so they're pretty vanilla. They just rely on the talent to make plays. . . . They're going to miss David Andrews at center. In fact, they're probably concerned about their depth at offensive line. But Chubb makes them a good line anyway, because he doesn't force them to hold their blocks that long.

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X-FACTOR

As a freshman All-America, **Shaq Lawson** had 35 tackles (10 for loss) and four sacks. He followed that up in 2014 with 44 tackles and 3½ sacks. Now, after a mass exodus of Tigers linemen, much more will be expected from the 6' 3", 275-pound junior. Lawson's off to a good start: Dabo Swinney raved about his pass rushing during the spring.



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SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

Clemson can work out the kinks against Wofford and Appalachian State before its season-defining stretch: a Thursday-night trip to Louisville (Sept. 17), followed by daunting home games against Notre Dame and Georgia Tech. If the Tigers make it through mid-October unbeaten, a visit from Florida State (Nov. 7) will be the biggest obstacle in their quest for an ACC championship.

12. CLEMSON

◆ BY / ZAC ELLIS

THE QB OF THE FUTURE IS HERE

A broken right index finger and a torn left ACL couldn't prevent the arrival of quarterback **Deshaun Watson**. Despite missing nearly seven full games with injuries, he threw for 1,466 yards and 14 touchdowns as a freshman and looked every bit the five-star signee he was. Now healthy, Watson says, "I want to come back even better."

With the departure of offensive coordinator Chad Morris to SMU, Tony Elliott and Jeff Scott jointly take over a fast-paced unit that has just one starting lineman returning—center Ryan Norton—but plenty of talent: 6' 4" junior wide-out Mike Williams (57 catches for 1,030 yards), sophomore receiver Artavis Scott (76 catches, 965 yards) and sophomore running back Wayne Gallman (769 rushing yards in '14).

After leading the country in total defense last fall (4.0 yards per play), the Tigers have to replace All-America linemen Vic Beasley and Grady Jarrett and two All-ACC picks, linebacker Stephone Anthony and corner Garry Peters. Still, coach Dabo Swinney says, the unit "is talented—maybe more talented." Junior ends Shaq Lawson and Kevin Dodd and senior tackle D.J. Reader lead a rebuilt front, with sophomore corner Mackensie Alexander heading up the secondary. □



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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

Deshaun Watson is going to be the guy who makes the offense go. The added dimension he brings is his accuracy, especially down the field. . . . The key is keeping him healthy. They ask the quarterback to run, but how much risk are they willing to take? It might be one of those things where you see Watson run more in the red zone or in short-yardage situations, as opposed to general play. . . . The defense was really good and fun to watch. It was multiple, hard to block and athletic. Coordinator Brent Venables has done a great job. . . . I don't want to use the word *rebuilding*, but they lost some guys, and I'm not sure they'll be quite like they were last year. They don't have the experience, but do they have enough players to be a dominant defense in the ACC?

13.

OLE MISS

BY / ANDY STAPLES



SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

The first test comes on Sept. 19, when the Rebels travel to Tuscaloosa to face an Alabama team that hasn't forgotten losing 23-17 in Oxford last year. Ole Miss should be favored in six of its first seven games (excepting Bama) and needs to win them all entering a run of five straight SEC West matchups. If the Rebs don't come into that stretch with momentum, their season could stall.

the Peach Bowl. Junior receiver **Laquon Treadwell** (13.2 yards per catch) also broke his leg last year, but he has loaded his Instagram feed with videos showing how thoroughly he has recovered.

Junior tight end Evan Engram—who at 6'3" and 227 pounds could be a receiver—presents a tough matchup for safeties or linebackers with his athleticism; the Rebels will move him around to ensure maximum confusion. If junior Chad Kelly or sophomore Ryan Buchanan can take command at quarterback, then the offense could pair with a star-studded defense to produce another special season.

Defensive tackle Robert Nkemdiche, a junior, helped Ole Miss limit opposing rushers to 3.5 yards a carry in 2014. Nickel Tony Conner will lead a secondary that might be better, thanks to the arrival of cornerback Tony Bridges, a junior college transfer, and the health of corner Tee Shepard, who missed 2014 with a torn toe tendon. □

X-FACTOR

Chad Kelly has the size (6'2", 215 pounds), the arm and the bloodline—he's the nephew of Bills Hall of Famer Jim Kelly—to be an excellent QB. He also wants to change his story. He was thrown off Clemson's team for a litany of transgressions, and last December he was arrested at a bar in his hometown of Buffalo after a brawl. (Charges were dropped.)

TACKLE INELIGIBLE?

Junior offensive tackle Laremy Tunsil won't face legal trouble after a fight with his stepfather, Lindsey Miller, in July (each dropped the charges), but an ongoing NCAA investigation into alleged improper benefits could affect his eligibility. His loss would devastate an attack relying on his return from a broken right leg suffered in

OPPOSING COACHES TAKE

Their front four has got speed, and they're just all over the place. Robert Nkemdiche can be anything from a noseguard to a defensive end—he's that big and that athletic. . . . They know how to defend the spread because they see it every day at practice. It's a unique defense versus the spread. They get that rover safety playing seven yards deep as an addition to the run defense. [Mike Hilton has moved there from cornerback.] You've got to be a physical cat to play that spot. . . . If you get on the edge, they're going to run you down, but if you run downhill on them, you can open things up and move the ball. . . . Their receivers are tall and rangy, and they come down with a lot of jump balls. If you pack a lot of guys up front to stop the run, they can go deep. . . . They also use a lot of motion, which forces you to be very disciplined.

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X-FACTOR

The Bruins had just four sacks in their first four games last year before junior linebacker **Deon Hollins** emerged. He finished the year with nine sacks, including six in the final four games and three in a 40-35 Alamo Bowl win over Kansas State. If the 6-foot, 225-pound Hollins can produce all season, it will create opportunities for his teammates.



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SCHEDULE
ANALYSIS

BYU should test the Bruins' defense on Sept. 19, but the real difficulty will come in-conference. Four of UCLA's five Pac-12 South foes won nine or more games last year and finished in the AP Top 25. Back-to-back games against Arizona (away) and Arizona State (home) to begin conference play should set the tone, and a crosstown trip to USC to end the season could determine the division champ.

14. UCLA

◆ BY / COLIN BECHT

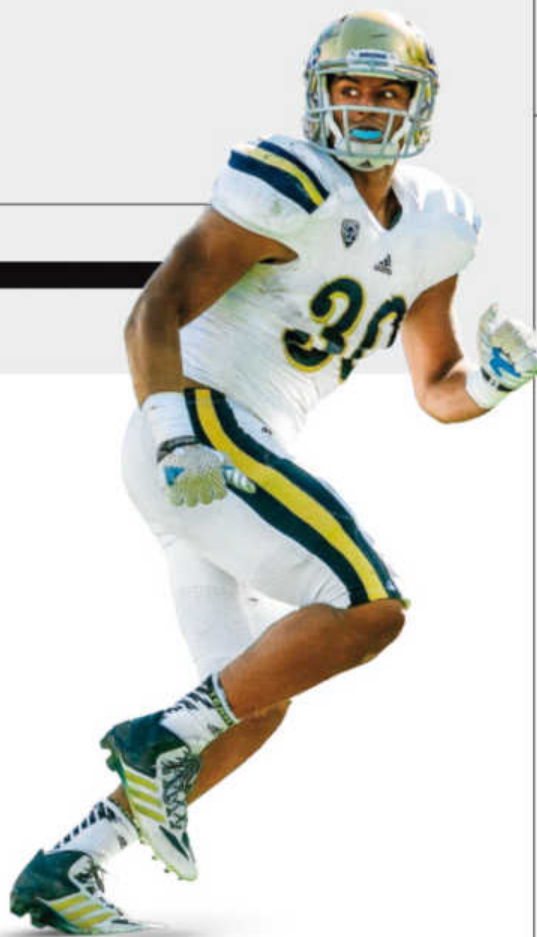
EXPERIENCED, WITH ONE EXCEPTION

With 18 returning starters, UCLA packs much of the firepower from last year's 10-3 squad, which missed out on the Pac-12 title game only because of a 31-10 loss to Stanford in the regular-season finale. Yet for all that experience, there's a critical piece missing: Brett Hundley, the Bruins' three-year starter at quarterback.

Coach Jim Mora has yet to name his replacement, but Josh Rosen, the top-ranked QB recruit in 2015 who enrolled in January, is widely considered to be the favorite. Rosen is known for his strong arm, but his composure and game IQ set him apart. Mora says Rosen has gained a comfort level after going through spring practices and that his teammates have developed a confidence in him as well.

Rosen will have experience around him in senior running back Paul Perkins, who led the Pac-12 with 1,575 yards rushing last year, and receiver Jordan Payton (67 catches, 954 yards, seven TDs).

On defense the Bruins lose Butkus Award-winning linebacker Eric Kendricks but retain the freakishly athletic, 6' 1", 232-pound **Myles Jack**, who'll move inside this year. Longtime Penn State defensive coordinator Tom Bradley joins the staff, and Mora expects Bradley to make UCLA more aggressive with its blitzes. □



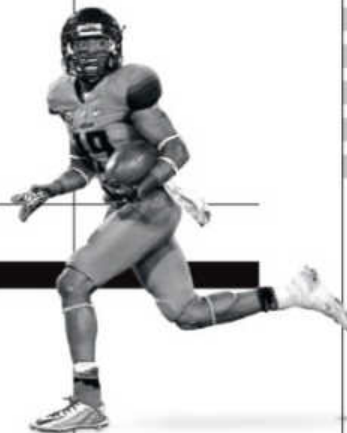
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OPPOSING
COACH'S TAKE

The thing that stands out with the Bruins is their athleticism and speed across the board. They're efficient offensively and really balanced, so you don't get any keys on what they're going to do in certain situations. They spread you out and make you defend all 11 guys and every inch of the field. . . . Paul Perkins is an outstanding back with good vision, and they've got some wide receivers that I think are bigger than our defensive linemen. . . . Their defense doesn't allow you a lot of easy throws because the corners come up and press you. You have to try to beat them downfield to keep them honest. Their linebackers cover a lot of ground and close well, so your underneath passing windows are smaller. . . . Last year they were effective at changing their front from snap to snap and did a nice job of confusing our guys.

15.

ARIZONA

BY / BRIAN HAMILTON



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SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

The way the schedule worked out this year, Arizona has to play all 12 of its games without a bye. "That's the first time in 28 years I've ever had that," coach Rich Rodriguez says. "We got the short straw." Here's another way the Wildcats don't get a break: Their showdowns with conference title contenders Stanford (Oct. 3), USC (Nov. 7) and Arizona State (Nov. 21) are all on the road.

85—no, not last year," co-offensive coordinator Rod Smith says. "We understood it because of the s---storm he was in as a freshman [starter]."

The 6' 2", 205-pound Solomon watched more film in the off-season; in the spring he had only one or two practices at less than 85%, according to Smith. Solomon's crisp reads can spring sophomore tailback Nick Wilson (1,375 yards in '14) and junior receiver Cayleb Jones (73 catches for 1,019 yards), and his confident direction can smooth the assimilation of three new starters on the O-line.

A productive offense can also help offset a defense that allowed 28.2 points

per game, even with 6' 1", 246-pound All-America junior linebacker Scooby Wright (29 tackles for loss). Solomon envisions a return to the Fiesta Bowl, where Arizona finished last season with a 38–30 loss to Boise State. "The national championship game is in that stadium, right?" Solomon says. On that, he's 100% accurate. □

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X-FACTOR

Has DaVonte' Neal found a home? First came his 2012 transfer from Notre Dame to Arizona. Now he's shifted from receiver (27 catches for 214 yards in 2014) to cornerback. The 5' 10", 173-pound redshirt junior can add offensive pop—Neal had an 81-yard punt return for a TD in '14—to a secondary that last fall had two freshman starters at the corners, Cam Denson and Jarvis McCall.

PASSING JUDGMENT

Anu Solomon gained national attention after passing for 3,793 yards (and 28 touchdowns) as a redshirt freshman in 2014. But his coaches are focused on a different number: 85%, the rate of successful decisions, from deciphering coverages to the timing of handoffs, they expect their QB to make. "For me to tell you he was hitting

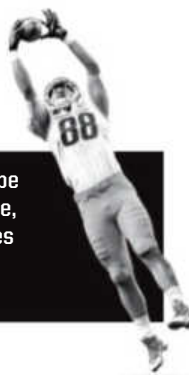
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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

The Wildcats are right on the edge of becoming a power. . . . Anu Solomon has skills. He's an excellent passer, makes good decisions, gets the ball where it needs to be. For him, the refinement will be what he does to basically own that team. . . . Nick Wilson is very explosive. He can make cuts and get into creases. It's a bit of a sixth sense. . . . Scooby Wright's drive and desire to dominate—those are the things that stand out most about him. . . . You don't see the 3-3-5 defense that much. They try to create some blocking problems. . . . If they're going to win the Pac-12, they have to step it up on defense. It's hard to beat the really good teams by saying, Hey, we're going to outscore everybody.

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X-FACTOR

Wideouts Thomas Sperbeck (below) and Shane Williams-Rhodes will be the top targets, but tight end **Jake Roh**, a 6' 3", 219-pound sophomore, needs to emerge as a consistent third option after making 35 catches for 408 yards in 2014. "That's the position that gives this offense all the versatility," says offensive coordinator Eliah Drinkwitz.



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SCHEDULE
ANALYSIS

Boise State opens with a visit from Washington on Sept. 4, which brings the return of former coach Chris Petersen. Beyond that the Broncos' tough tests all come relatively early: They play road games at BYU, Virginia, Colorado State and Utah State by Oct. 16. To have a chance of convincing the playoff committee to give them a shot, they'll need a clean sweep.

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OPPOSING
COACH'S TAKE

On defense, I don't know if they have a weakness. Their biggest strength has always been their front seven. Running the ball against them is a challenge. Kamalei Correa has developed into probably the best defensive player in the Mountain West, and I'm sure he's only gotten stronger. . . . They're able to disguise coverages extremely well, but they're a high-risk, high-reward type deal. When you get a chance to crease 'em, you have to take advantage. . . . It will be interesting to see how things work with a new offensive coordinator and a new quarterback. The running back question isn't as vital—they have plenty of those. . . . I would guess they're going to lean heavily on the run, especially early, until they get their quarterback situation settled.

16. BOISE STATE

◆ BY / BEN GLICKSMAN

BRACKET BREAKERS

Last season was supposed to be a transitional year for the Broncos. Instead they went 12–2, beating Arizona in the Fiesta Bowl 38–30. This fall 17 starters return, giving second-year coach Bryan Harsin's squad the necessary pieces to make a run up the rankings.

Boise State's strength is in the trenches. The entire offensive line is back, led by senior center Marcus Henry (6' 3", 296) and senior left tackle Rees Odhiambo (6' 4", 303), both All-Mountain West selections. On defense, 6' 3", 244-pound junior defensive end Kamalei Correa—who had 19 tackles for a loss, including 12 sacks, in 2014—joins senior defensive tackle Tyler Horn to form a pass-rushing tandem that should keep opposing QBs off balance. The secondary should also be formidable with senior safety Darian Thompson and senior corner Donte Deayon, while the linebacking corps features junior Tanner Vallejo, the Fiesta Bowl's defensive MVP. Last year's unit was hurt by the big play, allowing eight TDs of 50-plus yards, but a now-veteran core should bring improvement.

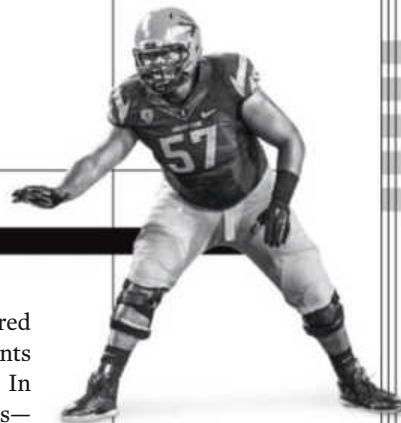
At quarterback, the team is confident a signal-caller will emerge from a four-man race, and the Broncos have five options in the backfield, including brothers Cory and Kelsey Young. "I know everybody thinks it's a nervous thing," says new offensive coordinator Eliah Drinkwitz. "But it's really not." The Broncos have developed a reputation as party crashers. Expect them to live up to it. □



17.

ARIZONA STATE

◆ BY / THAYER EVANS



SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

Let the Pac-12 vs. SEC debate begin with the Sun Devils' not-so-neutral-site opener against Texas A&M in Houston. The conference schedule is more favorable: They get USC (Sept. 26), Oregon (Oct. 29), Washington (Nov. 14) and Arizona (Nov. 21) in Tempe, where they're 12-2 over the past two years. ASU's road test will come on an Oct. 3 trip to UCLA.

The Sun Devils scored more than 50 points three times in 2014. In Bercovici's three starts—he totaled 1,243 yards and nine TDs—they averaged 182 more yards passing; twice he threw for more than 485. To maintain that air pressure Graham moved senior **D.J. Foster**, a 1,081-yard rusher, to wideout, where he replaces field-stretcher Jaelen Strong. That's possible because Arizona State has sophomores Demario Richard (5.7 yards per carry) and Kalen Ballage (6' 3", 222 pounds) ready to take over the run game.

Last season the Sun Devils had nine new starters on defense. All of them are back, but none has proved to be the consistent pass-rusher they desperately need. New special teams coach Shawn Slocum, who held the same post with the Packers for the last six years, has an even bigger problem to fix: a unit that was last in the Pac-12 in kickoff (555 total yards) and punt (3.7 each) returns. □

X-FACTOR

Todd Graham projects left tackle **Evan Goodman** as a future first-round pick, even though the junior has never started. The 6' 4", 314-pound Goodman was buried behind Jamil Douglas, the Dolphins' fourth-round choice in May. Now Goodman gets his chance, but he'll need to lead a line with two new starters to keep ASU's high-octane offense humming.

RETURNS TO EXCELLENCE

With fifth-year senior quarterback Mike Bercovici, a veteran defense and a new leader for special teams, coach Todd Graham aims to improve on last year's 10-3 record, which included a 36-31 Sun Bowl victory over Duke. "We should be the best we've been," says Graham, who's entering his fourth year in Tempe.

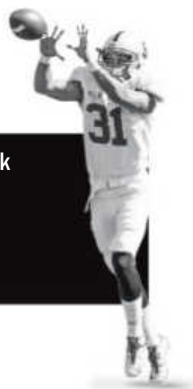
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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

Mike Bercovici has a big arm and can make all the throws. They'll take a lot of shots downfield. . . . They've got really good skill players. Guys who are explosive and can play in space. . . . Even though D.J. Foster is playing in the slot, I'm sure he'll get just as many touches. . . . Defensively, they're blitz-oriented. Todd Graham loves taking chances, but they're calculated. They get to you so quickly that they create a lot of negative-yardage plays. They thrive on pick-sixes and fumble recoveries. . . . They're not as deep as other teams in the Pac-12, particularly on defense. They're not very big on that side either. But their staff is very good at figuring out your play, then blitzing into it. The times they're wrong, though, they give up big plays.

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X-FACTOR

Redshirt freshman **Alijah Holder** could be Stanford's No. 1 cornerback on his first college snap. The 6' 2", 202-pound Holder, who blew away his coaches this spring after adding 18 pounds to his wiry frame, can guard the slot or cover out wide. "No one makes him uncomfortable," says Cardinal OC Mike Bloomgren. "He's cool and collected."



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SCHEDULE
ANALYSIS

Their reputation for having docile home crowds could change if they host November games with College Football Playoff implications. Sound far-fetched? Consider that Stanford's only challenging road game is in Week 3, at USC. Beat the Trojans, and the Cardinal will be favored in six straight heading into a tantalizing homestand: Oregon (Nov. 14), California (Nov. 21) and Notre Dame (Nov. 28).

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OPPOSING
COACH'S TAKE

Their strength will be at linebacker; expect senior Blake Martinez to blast through the A and B gaps in their 4-3 scheme to disrupt things. . . . They have to be nervous about losing their whole secondary. There's talent back there—the defense looked ahead of the offense in the spring game—but not experience. They'll lack little things, like the ability to tell routes based on the wideouts' splits. . . . In past years they had a running back who could fall forward and gain four or five yards on first down. They were always ahead of the game, with second-and-five and then third-and-two. Without that last year, Kevin Hogan couldn't compensate in second- or third-and-long. He just doesn't have the arm to get them out of those situations.

18. STANFORD

◆ BY / PETE THAMEL



BACK TO BASICS

The Cardinal had just eight wins last season after averaging 11.5 the previous four, and the reason for the decline was clear: the lack of a dominant tailback. Stanford coaches expect sophomore Christian McCaffrey to be the bell cow this fall, rekindling memories of grinders Tyler Gaffney and Stepfan Taylor. The 6-foot McCaffrey, son of former NFL receiver Ed McCaffrey, bulked up to 205 pounds to become effective in pass protection and between the tackles. He can handle Stanford's go-to inside power play, split out to the slot (14.8 yards per catch) and return kicks and punts. "The biggest thing is his versatility," says coach David Shaw. "He's a special cat."

Kevin Hogan (24–8 as a starter) is returning at quarterback, for a fourth season. He has four starters back on the offensive line and top NFL prospect Austin Hooper at tight end. On defense just three starters remain from the Pac-12's top-ranked unit in points allowed (16.4 per game), including senior inside linebacker **Blake Martinez**, who led Stanford in total tackles (102). The Cardinal are scrambling to replace four secondary starters, an ominous gap in the pass-centric Pac-12. All the more reason to hand the ball to McCaffrey and return to Stanford's smashmouth roots. □

19.

GEORGIA TECH

BY / ZAC ELLIS



TAKING A RUN AT GLORY

The Yellow Jackets won three of their final four games, all against Top 20 teams, including a 49–34 victory over Mississippi State in the Orange Bowl. This fall coach Paul Johnson wants to prove his team isn't a two-month wonder. Johnson's sneaky triple-option attack will again be led by junior **Justin Thomas** (5' 11", 189 pounds),

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

The Jackets are ACC Coastal Division favorites, even with a tough schedule. They visit both Notre Dame (Sept. 19) and Duke (Sept. 26), then draw potential Atlantic Division champs Clemson (away) and Florida State (home) in October. The season ends with a visit from rival Georgia—a contender for the SEC crown—at Bobby Dodd Stadium on Nov. 28.

who set the school's quarterback rushing record with 1,086 yards last year and has four starters returning on the O-line.

The backfield has key pieces missing: Synjyn Days, Zach Laskey and Charles Perkins, who combined for 2,218 yards in 2014. Senior Broderick Snoddy and junior Isiah Willis will battle for the A-back spot, with junior Marcus Allen returning at B-back. Junior Micheal Summers leads the receiving corps—though with Tech's emphasis on rushing, he had just seven catches for 45 yards.

Coordinator Ted Roof's defense finished ninth or worse in the ACC in every major defensive

category. He can only hope experience helps. All-ACC tackle Adam Gotsis, a 6' 5", 282-pound senior who had 6½ TFLs and three sacks last year, will again spearhead the line, supported by sophomore end KeShun Freeman. Four senior starters return in the secondary, including safety Jamal Golden (61 tackles, four INTs). □

X-FACTOR

Jabari Hunt-Days sat out last season after being declared academically ineligible. The former linebacker, who has 129 tackles and 11½ TFLs in 21 career starts, is back at a new position. After beefing up from 252 to 295 pounds in his time away, the 6' 3" Hunt-Days has shifted to DT for his senior year to bring some athleticism to the trenches.

OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

Game-planning for their offense is totally different. Nothing you do during the course of your season is going to help you. Planning for them can actually put you behind with other teams. . . . The biggest thing for them last year was getting a quarterback, Justin Thomas, who could make some plays. Now you've got to be able to defend all three phases of the option. . . . The way they play, they don't have to have big guys on the offensive line. They just have to have guys who can position-block. That offense is going to have 12- to 14-play drives. . . . The Coastal side of the league isn't quite as good as the Atlantic, so that's helped them. They've taken advantage of the situation.

▼▼▼
X-FACTOR

Maty Mauk has grown used to having big targets. But with the departures of receivers Bud Sasser (6' 2"), Jimmie Hunt (6-foot) and Darius White (6' 3"), sophomore **Nate Brown** needs to balance Mizzou's run game as a downfield threat. At 6' 3" and 205 pounds, the four-star recruit has the size, but he caught just five passes as a freshman.



▼▼▼
SCHEDULE
ANALYSIS

Barring a breakdown, the Tigers should start the season 4-0; their biggest hurdle comes in Week 7, an Oct. 17 matchup with Georgia in Athens. They get a tough nonconference opponent in BYU on Nov. 14, but that's at not-so-neutral Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City. A week later they face a home test against Tennessee (who they've beaten in three straight) before the finale at No. 22 Arkansas.

20. MISSOURI

◆ BY / JOAN NIESEN

WHERE'S THE RUSH?

After losing defensive ends Shane Ray and Markus Golden to the NFL, the Tigers seemed ready to rebuild their line with two more potential high draft picks: junior tackle Harold Brantley and sophomore end Marcus Loud. But Loud was dismissed from the team in May for an unspecified violation of team policies; a month later Brantley suffered myriad injuries in a car crash that will sideline him for the season. (He's expected to return in 2016.) Suddenly, Missouri had two huge holes to fill in a D that had led the SEC with 44 sacks.

Still, Mizzou brings back six starters on defense, including a strong secondary and linebacking corps—though it remains to be seen how much of that perception is a result of aggressive D-line play a year ago—and there's not likely to be much adjustment under new coordinator Barry Odom, who was a member of the staff in Columbia from 2003 to '11.

Junior quarterback **Maty Mauk** guided Mizzou to a second straight SEC East title, but he had an uneven first year at the helm (2,648 yards, 25 TDs and 13 INTs) after winning three of four starts as a freshman. To protect Mauk, Mizzou will have four of its top O-linemen returning, including senior center Evan Boehm (6' 3", 320 pounds), who's riding a streak of 40 consecutive starts. □



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OPPOSING
COACH'S TAKE

Coach Gary Pinkel and his staff should be getting more credit for their tremendous job of player development. . . . Maty Mauk is a good quarterback, but he can be streaky. You can't let him find his rhythm or it'll be a long day. You've got to mix it up on him and make sure you get pressure. If you get him off-balance and thinking, especially with his inexperienced receivers, you've got a good chance. . . . Defensively, they'll gamble more under new coordinator Barry Odom, but he'll still turn those guys loose up front, which is what lets them play zone coverage. They'll need to continue that relentlessness because their ends are so young this year. . . . With the experience they've got at linebacker and on the back end, Odom should be able to roll the dice.



21.

OKLAHOMA

BY / LINDSAY SCHNELL



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SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

After going 8-5 last year, OU can't afford to take anyone lightly. A Sept. 12 game at rising Tennessee should tell Bob Stoops a lot about whether his new offense is working, and don't be surprised if Texas pulls an upset on Oct. 10 in Dallas. The toughest stretch is mid-November, when the Sooners face Baylor (away), TCU (home) and Oklahoma State (away) with no bye.

Trevor Knight (179-of-316 passing for 2,300 yards, 14 touchdowns and 12 interceptions) in fall camp.

While Stoops has defended his program after a disappointing 8-5 season, he made eight changes to his staff, highlighted by the hiring of East Carolina offensive coordinator Lincoln Riley. Though he's an Air Raid disciple, Riley won't give up on the ground game—not with 5'11", 237-pound sophomore **Samaje Perine**, who last year set an FBS record with 427 rushing yards against Kansas.

After switching to a 3-4 defense in 2013, the Sooners will incorporate more 4-3 this year to cater to senior linebacker

Eric Striker's strengths. They have other effective run-stoppers in junior Dominique Alexander (107 tackles) and redshirt senior Frank Shannon (92 tackles in 2013, suspended for '14 for sexual misconduct). The problem lies with the secondary, which gave up 276.2 passing yards per game last season, most in school history. □

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X-FACTOR

After being suspended for his freshman season because of a misdemeanor assault charge (he took a plea bargain), running back **Joe Mixon** (6'2", 217 pounds) will have an instant impact. Mixon hasn't played in a real game since 2013 at Freedom High in Oakley, Calif., when he ran for 1,704 yards and 23 touchdowns. A gifted receiver, he's an ideal fit for the Sooners' new pass-heavy offense.

WHO WILL PILOT THE AIR RAID?

Don't believe everything you hear, says coach Bob Stoops. While popular chatter in Norman would indicate that the quarterback battle is decided, "that couldn't be further from the truth," says Stoops, who will give Texas Tech transfer Baker Mayfield (the Big 12 Offensive Freshman of the Year in 2013) a chance to unseat junior

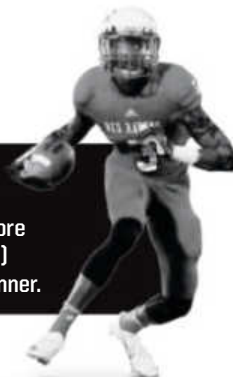
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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

It's going to be a different scenario with Lincoln Riley calling the plays, so they're a bit of an unknown. I imagine they'll try to throw it more, but with [running backs] Samaje Perine and Joe Mixon, they'll find a way to get them the ball too. If you look closely at what Riley did at ECU, he's good at adapting to the personnel he has. . . . When you're on offense, Stoops brings pressure from everywhere. Every week it's new looks, new blitzes. You have to be ready for any and everything. He wants you to make a mistake. . . . Talent-wise, they're always going to be right at the top of the conference; overall, they're just a solid defense. You've got to make them pay on some of the aggressiveness they bring each week. When they take a shot defensively, you have to respond immediately.

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X-FACTOR

Brandon Allen's view was frequently frightening last year. "A lot of defenses," he says, "lined up nine guys in the box." Can junior wide receiver **Dominique Reed** (6' 3", 4.3 speed) force teams to deploy more troops downfield? Reed, who had 16 TD catches at Coffeyville (Kans.) Community College last year, must quickly become a skilled route-runner.



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SCHEDULE
ANALYSIS

It's realistic for Arkansas to start 5-0 and enter the national title conversation. After noshing on UTEP, Toledo and Texas Tech, the Hogs have a manageable stretch by SEC standards—erratic Texas A&M in Arlington (Sept. 26) and a trip to rebuilding Tennessee (Oct. 3). Win those and the stakes will be high on Oct. 10, when the Hogs head to Alabama.

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OPPOSING
COACH'S TAKE

The offensive line revels in being the strength of the team; they'll push you until you surrender. To me, they show the value of having an identity and not wavering from it, even when the results aren't there [such as during their 17-game SEC losing streak]. It will be interesting to see, with Dan Enos calling the plays, how they evolve on offense. . . . Those two backs [Jonathan Williams and Alex Collins] are as good as any pair in the country. Brandon Allen is solid, and his best receiving threat is [junior tight end] Hunter Henry, who made ridiculous catches and is perfect for their play-action game. They love to get him lost behind the linebackers in space. . . . The D struggled against Auburn and A&M's pass games last year; as the season went on, they played faster and more confidently, but they're not designed to win shootouts.

22. ARKANSAS

◆ BY / PETE THAMEL

GRUNTING AND GRINDING

When coach Bret Bielema left Wisconsin for Arkansas in 2012, SEC watchers were doubtful that his grunt-and-grind, pro-style scheme would work against like-minded bullies LSU and Alabama. After shutting out the Tigers and coming within a fumble of beating the Tide last year, the Razorbacks turned many of those skeptics into believers. Arkansas finished 7-6 but had more heartbreaking misses than Dustin Johnson at the majors. Four starters are back on an offensive line that was the conference's best, as are senior **Jonathan Williams** and junior Alex Collins, the country's only tandem of 1,000-yard backs last year. Most SEC quarterbacks need name tags, but third-year starter Brandon Allen gives Arkansas consistency (20 TDs to just five interceptions in 2014) and experience (25 starts). He and new offensive coordinator Dan Enos will be limited in what they can do downfield, however, because the Hogs' receiving crew is the weakest in the league.

Look for second-year coordinator Robb Smith's defense to recalibrate after losing five starters. Immediate help comes from an unexpected place: freshman Hjalte Froholdt, a 6' 5", 311-pound tackle from Svendborg, Denmark. He's got huge upside, just like Bielema's Hogs. □



23. LSU

◆ BY / GABRIEL BAUMGAERTNER



X-FACTOR

A candidate for the Outland and Lombardi awards, 6' 6", 320-pound senior **Vadal Alexander** is switching to right tackle after starting 25 games at left guard over the past two seasons. Alexander has lost 30 pounds since his freshman year, but he still has good size, and coaches like his ability to eliminate linebackers in the run game.



CARRYING THE TIGERS

After an impressive if inconsistent freshman season—six games with 52 yards or less rushing and five games of more than 100—**Leonard Fournette** will be one of the nation's most exciting players. The 6' 1" 230-pounder will be the focal point of coach Les Miles's offense, especially because LSU has yet to determine

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

After the home opener against McNeese State, there will be no easy prey for the Tigers. September includes back-to-back dates with teams that beat LSU last season, Mississippi State (away) and Auburn (home). The season ends with a savage November: at Alabama, Arkansas, at Ole Miss, Texas A&M. Getting into the playoff picture will be a daunting task.

who will be under center.

Last year's starting QB, junior Anthony Jennings, was suspended after his arrest in June for unlawful entry of a dwelling. Miles reinstated the 6' 2", 216-pound Jennings (11 TDs, seven INTs in 2014) on July 31 after the charges against him were dropped. The Tigers' other option, sophomore Brandon Harris, has made just one career start but has impressed the staff with his confidence and command of the playbook. It helps that LSU has a veteran offensive line and one of the nation's best young receiving units in 6' 3" sophomore Malachi Dupre, 6' 2" junior Travin Dural and speedy 6-foot

sophomore slot receiver John Diarse.

After two seasons as an assistant at Alabama, Kevin Steele takes over as defensive coordinator. Expect him to lean on the secondary, where senior safety Jalen Mills, a potential first-round pick, is paired with promising junior cornerback Tre'Davious White. □



OPPOSING COACHES TAKE

The challenge Leonard Fournette presents is that he's so fast and so physical, he can run inside and out. . . . LSU's uncertainty at quarterback was really key last season. Both Anthony Jennings and Brandon Harris are very talented, so I think they'll get it figured out. They have a ton of skill on the outside and a formidable running game. The QBs will get some play-action going and not hurt the team by trying to do too much. . . . They lost some guys in their front seven, but everybody in their back end returns, and they already had an extremely talented secondary. That back four is going to be something to reckon with. . . . I think you'll see some stuff that's similar to what Alabama runs with [defensive coordinator Kevin] Steele arriving. He's a great defensive mind.

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X-FACTOR

Three of the top five receivers departed this off-season, but senior **Alex Erickson**, who had a team-high 772 yards on 55 catches in 2014, is back. Erickson is consistent and physical, and if he can help quarterback Joel Stave stretch defenses, that could open up running room for Corey Clement. "You've got to be balanced," coach Paul Chryst says.



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SCHEDULE
ANALYSIS

Wisconsin can't afford a slow start; it faces Alabama at a neutral site in Week 1. After that, the Badgers should coast through nonconference play, and they avoid East division heavyweights Ohio State and Michigan State in crossovers. If they can survive an Oct. 10 game at Nebraska and a Nov. 28 tilt at Minnesota, the Badgers should run the table in conference play.

24. WISCONSIN

◆ BY / CHRIS JOHNSON



RUNNING LIKE CLOCKWORK

At most programs, coaching turnover is due to lack of success. Yet Wisconsin has continued to win despite two changes over the last three years. Gary Andersen, who replaced Bret Bielema in 2013, left for Oregon State, so in steps Paul Chryst, a former Badgers offensive coordinator under Bielema who should keep the program rolling after three seasons as Pitt's coach.

Expect Chryst to stick with Wisconsin's run-oriented offensive identity. The Badgers lost record-breaking tailback Melvin Gordon to the NFL, but junior Corey Clement is primed for a breakout. He gained 949 yards last year as the backup and spent the off-season improving his endurance in preparation for a bigger workload. To ensure defenses can't key on Clement, Wisconsin will need consistency from a passing attack that ranked 12th in the Big Ten. Senior quarterback **Joel Stave** showed signs of improvement toward the end of 2014, and Chryst says he's been impressed by Stave's approach over the summer.

The Badgers need to fill holes in the defensive front, but they can lean on one of the Big Ten's top secondaries. If that group performs as well as expected and the ground game continues to wear teams down, Wisconsin should contend for its second consecutive West division title. □

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OPPOSING
COACH'S TAKE

They find ways to run the football, and can control the pace and the flow of the game. They've been great at developing offensive linemen, and the number of guys who have gone on to the NFL is a reflection of that. . . . What they've done in the running game—with multiple blocking schemes and the use of multiple tight ends—isn't something you see every week. . . . I was impressed with their defense overall. We were high on a couple of the guys in the secondary. Some of their corners were exceptional coverage guys, especially Sojourn Shelton. . . . [They're] very physical up front, very fundamentally sound. They really force you to find ways to move the football.

25.

MISSISSIPPI STATE

◆ BY / PETE THAMEL



SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

LSU's visit to Starkville in Week 2 looms as a pivotal game—and a loud one: With kickoff at 8:15 p.m., the clanging of cowbells is likely to be heard throughout Oktibbeha County. After back-to-back meetings at Auburn (Sept. 26) and Texas A&M (Oct. 3), the most brutal November in college football awaits: at Missouri, Alabama, at Arkansas, and Ole Miss.

senior QB Dak Prescott's command as a third-year starter who accounted for 4,435 yards and 41 touchdowns in 2014. It also helps mask the Bulldogs' biggest weakness: an offensive line that lost three players who had combined for 113 career starts.

A diverse and deep receiving corps will create huge mismatches and invite touches in space. Expect monster years from dynamic junior slot receiver Fred Ross Jr. (6' 2", 207 pounds) and a future vertical threat in the NFL, junior **De'Runnya Wilson** (6' 5", 215). Look for redshirt freshman tailback Dontavian Lee (6' 1", 227) to emerge as a star by midseason.

On D, senior corners Taveze Calhoun (25 starts) and Will Redmond (Mel Kiper's No. 1 senior corner) are the SEC's top blend of experience and talent. Their blitzing ability will alleviate pressure on the two new starters at safety and give end Ryan Brown (3½ sacks, seven TFLs) time to corral quarterbacks. □

X-FACTOR

Any lingering uneasiness over losing middle linebacker Benardrick McKinney to the NFL can be alleviated by watching redshirt freshman **Gerri Green**. At 6' 4" and 243 pounds, Green wowed strength coach Rick Court with a 4.57 40-yard dash and has just 7.7% body fat. "He certainly is going to be a really, really good player," DC Manny Diaz says. "The issue is when."

FULL SPEED AHEAD

A 1–2 finish to the regular season and a 49–34 Orange Bowl loss to Georgia Tech dulled the buzz from the Bulldogs' historic 2014 season, which began 9–0 and featured the school's first No. 1 ranking. To try to ensure a happier ending in '15, coach Dan Mullen cranked up the tempo of State's offense this spring. The speedier approach exploits

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OPPOSING COACH'S TAKE

Dak Prescott makes it all go. He's such a threat to run that you can't go help out on the 6' 5" receiver [De'Runnya Wilson] or blitz often to create havoc on a young offensive line. To try and stop Prescott, you need to keep him in the pocket, eliminate escape lanes, take away the shorter passes and force him to throw down the field. He could be more of a factor if they go tempo, because one missed alignment or read, and he can get them points very quickly. . . . Defensively, they were as good a front seven as we saw all year. They reminded me a bit of the San Francisco 49ers. Even with what the Bulldogs lost, they've still got big, physical guys up front who can run. You need to keep them moving and attack the perimeter; you can't do a whole lot of straight-ahead running.



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CF15 GROUP OF FIVE

◆ BY / CHRIS JOHNSON

5 TEAMS THAT COULD GET THE GROUP OF FIVE'S "NEW YEAR'S SIX" BOWL BID

BOISE STATE, *Mountain West*

The Broncos are poised to earn the G5's bid again. After a home opener against Washington, Boise has two chances to boost its résumé with games at BYU and Virginia. Even a nonconference loss won't derail the Broncos as long as they take care of business in the Mountain West—especially their Oct. 16 game at Utah State.

UTAH STATE, *Mountain West*

Dual-threat quarterback Chuckie Keeton was granted a fifth year of eligibility after knee injuries cut short his past two seasons. With Keeton and one of the conferences' better defenses, the Aggies could make a case if they beat Boise and succeed on the road against Pac-12 foes Utah and Washington.

GEORGIA SOUTHERN, *Sun Belt*

As first-year members of the FBS last year, the Eagles were barred from the postseason despite going 8-0 in conference play. To make the leap from no bowl to a New Year's Six game, Georgia Southern will need to fare well in tests at West Virginia and Georgia and go unbeaten in the Sun Belt again.

The highest-rated champion from one of the Group of Five conferences earns a spot in a New Year's Eve/Day bowl.

5 PLAYERS WHO DESERVE ATTENTION

RASHARD HIGGINS

Wide receiver, *Colorado State*

Higgins was named a first-team All-America by SI after he made 96 catches, 17 for touchdowns, and led the nation with 145.8 receiving yards per game last season. The 6' 2", 190-pound junior could put up similar numbers again even though he lost his coach (Jim McElwain to Florida) and quarterback (Garrett Grayson to the Saints).

D.J. PUMPHREY

Running back, *San Diego State*

At 5' 9" and 180 pounds, Pumphrey may not seem built to carry a big workload, but no running back returning to the Mountain West logged more carries (276) than he did in 2014. After gaining a league-high 1,867 rushing yards, the junior, a shifty one-cut runner, will get plenty of touches while the Aztecs work in a new quarterback.



5 KEY MATCHUPS

WASHINGTON at BOISE STATE

Sept. 4 Boise State will have a chance to make its case early. While Washington must replace multiple first-round draft picks from its defense and has yet to settle on a starting quarterback, the Huskies will be sure to supply a little extra effort for their coach, former Broncos head man Chris Petersen, in his first return to the blue turf.

OLE MISS at MEMPHIS

Oct. 17 The Tigers performed so well last season (10-3) that fourth-year coach Justin Fuente was connected to several "big-time" vacancies. Fuente, 39, could become an even more coveted candidate this off-season if he can upset the Rebels, a nine-win SEC team that held a Top 5 ranking for part of 2014.

UTAH STATE at UTAH

Sept. 11 In the 112th meeting of the rivalry, the Aggies will be seeking a signature nonconference victory over a Utah team that will have just faced Michigan in a tough season opener. Utah State snapped a 12-game losing skid in the series in 2012, then fell by only four points in '13, when the Utes struggled to stop Keeton.



They play FBS football outside the Power Five, a lot of it very well. Here are the teams, players and games to watch from the five conferences looking to crash the New Year's party

KAREEM HUNT
RB, Toledo

CINCINNATI, American Athletic Conference

The Bearcats are good enough to win the AAC. The question is whether they are good enough to win nonconference games against Miami (home) and BYU (away). A loss in either would reduce Cincinnati's margin for error during conference play, which includes formidable matchups at Houston and Memphis.

TOLEDO, Mid-American Conference

The Rockets' hopes could be dashed before October. After a home opener against Stony Brook, Toledo travels to face SEC riser Arkansas, then welcomes the Big 12's Iowa State. Those games—the first in particular—will be difficult, but winning both would keep Toledo in the conversation heading into the MAC campaign.



GUNNER KIEL
Quarterback, Cincinnati

Kiel verbally pledged to two schools (Indiana and LSU), signed with another (Notre Dame) and then transferred to a fourth (Cincinnati) before playing his first snap. After helping the Bearcats win a share of the AAC championship as a sophomore, Kiel, aided by a strong receiving corps, could push them to double-digit wins.

GERRAND JOHNSON
Defensive tackle, Louisiana-Monroe

Rarely do tackles lead their teams in, well, tackles. Johnson (6' 1", 290 pounds) did so last year with 93, including 12½ for a loss and six sacks, earning All-Sun Belt recognition for the second consecutive season. Eight starters return to a defense that tied for first in the conference in yards allowed per play (5.3).

CHUCKIE KEETON
Quarterback, Utah State

In his last full season, as a sophomore in 2012, Keeton completed 67.6% of his passes, rushed for 4.8 yards per carry and accounted for 3,992 total yards and 35 touchdowns. If he regains that form after twice tearing his left ACL, the fifth-year senior could once again be a Heisman Trophy candidate.



MISSOURI at ARKANSAS STATE
Sept. 12 A game against the reigning SEC East champion at Centennial Bank Stadium in Jonesboro, Ark., offers an opportunity for the Red Wolves to score a marquee win before their Sun Belt season begins. Senior QB Fredi Knighten is back to pilot an offense that has nine returning starters and ranked second in the conference with 36.7 points per game.



MIAMI at CINCINNATI
Oct. 1 This is the Bearcats' best chance to boost their bona fides outside the conference. Miami quarterback Brad Kaaya, the ACC's rookie of the year in 2014, will test a suspect defense, but Cincinnati will counter with one of the better passing games in the AAC. A Miami loss would turn up the heat on coach Al Golden.

PROJECTED CONFERENCE CHAMPION

**CONFERENCE USA:**

Western Kentucky
Quarterback Brandon Doughty is back after completing 67.5% of his passes for a nation-best 4,830 yards and 49 touchdowns. The Hilltoppers are well-equipped to win shootouts, with eight starters back on offense, including standout running back Leon Allen (1,490 yards). Still, even marginal improvement on D would help: Western Kentucky ranked 124th in the nation last season in yards allowed per play (6.66).

**MID-AMERICAN CONFERENCE:**

Toledo
The Rockets bring back one of the MAC's top rushers in junior Kareem Hunt (866 yards), two quarterbacks with starting experience (junior Logan Woodside and senior Phillip Ely) and an imposing front seven led by second-team all-conference tackles Orion Jones (senior) and Treyvon Hester (junior). One snag: The offensive line needs five new starters. If that unit coalesces, Toledo should hold off Northern Illinois and Western Michigan.

**AMERICAN ATHLETIC CONFERENCE:**

Cincinnati
After dropping their AAC opener last season, the Bearcats rattled off seven straight wins in conference before losing to Virginia Tech 33-17 in the Military Bowl. Cincinnati could be better this season if its defense—which lost linebacker Jeff Luc and DE Terrell Hartsfield—can make strides. A strong receiving corps is headlined by seniors Shaq Washington, Mekale McKay and Chris Moore.

**MOUNTAIN WEST:**

Boise State
Expect the Broncos to take another step forward after they won 12 games and upset Arizona in the Fiesta Bowl 38-30. Despite losing quarterback Grant Hedrick (graduation), top tailback Jay Ajayi (the NFL) and coordinator Mike Sanford (Notre Dame), the offense is strong, led by receivers Shane Williams-Rhodes and Thomas Sperbeck. Key contributors remain from a defense that held its final three regular-season opponents to fewer than 20 points each.

**SUN BELT:**

Georgia Southern
After last year, anything short of a perfect conference campaign would register as a letdown. Junior running back Matt Breida leads a triple-option attack that paced the nation in 2014 (379.2 rushing yards per game), and a pair of all-conference honorable-mention performers in junior linebacker Antwione Williams and sophomore defensive lineman Jay Ellison should help offset a shaky secondary.

FULL CONFERENCE STANDINGS

**CONFERENCE USA****East**

1. Western Kentucky
2. Middle Tennessee
3. Marshall
4. Old Dominion
5. Florida Atlantic
6. Florida International
7. Charlotte

West

1. Louisiana Tech
2. Rice
3. Southern Miss
4. UTEP
5. UTSA
6. North Texas

**MID-AMERICAN CONFERENCE****East**

1. Bowling Green
2. Akron
3. Ohio
4. UMass
5. Buffalo
6. Kent State
7. Miami (Ohio)

West

1. Toledo
2. Western Michigan
3. Northern Illinois
4. Ball State
5. Central Michigan
6. Eastern Michigan

**AMERICAN ATHLETIC CONFERENCE****East**

1. Cincinnati
2. UCF
3. East Carolina
4. Temple
5. South Florida
6. UConn

West

1. Navy
2. Houston
3. Memphis
4. Tulane
5. SMU
6. Tulsa

**MOUNTAIN WEST****Mountain**

1. Boise State
2. Utah State
3. Air Force
4. Colorado State
5. New Mexico
6. Wyoming

West

1. San Diego State
2. San Jose State
3. Fresno State
4. Nevada
5. Hawaii
6. UNLV

**SUN BELT**

1. Georgia Southern
2. Arkansas State
3. Appalachian State
4. Louisiana-Lafayette
5. South Alabama
6. Louisiana-Monroe
7. Texas State
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Take a Knee, Tom

→ BY PHIL TAYLOR

THERE IS a long history of players taking leagues and governing bodies to court over important issues. Curt Flood fighting baseball's reserve clause. Retired players suing the NFL over concussion damage. College athletes demanding compensation for the NCAA's use of their likenesses. All were cases worthy of judicial consideration.

But the Deflategate nonsense, now headed for a New York district court, is better suited to one of those syndicated TV courtrooms. It is ludicrous that a federal judge is about to devote his attention to a case based on a bag of footballs that may or may not—who really knows or cares anymore?—have been underinflated by about as much air as a child needs to blow out birthday candles. When NFL commissioner Roger Goodell refused to reduce Patriots quarterback Tom Brady's four-game suspension last week, Brady and the NFL Players Association quickly filed a lawsuit, and the entire saga, once merely a waste of time, became a waste of taxpayer money.

The matter should have been resolved months ago with a fine and perhaps a one-game suspension for Brady, who from this vantage point appears to have been involved with some misdemeanor tampering. But largely because Goodell can't seem to decide between a mocha and a latte without commissioning a two-month investigation and a 200-page report, the handling of the alleged crime and punishment has become a ponderous exercise, tarnishing both the commissioner and the quarterback.

There is only one man who can put an end to the madness before it goes any further: Brady. He should call a press conference and announce that he is accepting the suspension with no further appeal. He can make it clear that this is not an admission of guilt, just an effort to end the matter in the best interest of the sport and before it crowds the courts. It would be his movie-star moment, his chance to look directly into the TV cameras with those steely blue eyes and create a clip of video that would reflect far better on him in years to come than the press conference he had when the story broke, when he strained credibility by acting as if he barely knew what a football was, let alone how to deflate one.

Accepting his sentence would be a shrewd move by Brady.

Brady has far more to gain than lose by ending the legal battle—and sacrificing four games could also encourage scrutiny of Goodell's mishandling of the case.


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His golden boy image has been scuffed, and falling on his sword despite maintaining his innocence would be seen as a noble act. Some would view it as a tacit admission of guilt, but a weary public would surely give Brady points for putting the story out of its—and our—misery.

As he sacrifices four games of his career, Brady could also encourage even more scrutiny of Goodell's mishandling of the case, and of how the commissioner gave him the same suspension for mistreatment of footballs that he gave Ray Rice and Greg Hardy for their mistreatment of women, not to mention how the league played fast and loose with the notion of due process in deciding his punishment. Brady's words would carry more weight coming from a man who was martyring himself instead of one defending himself.

Brady has far more to gain than lose by ending the legal battle. Missing a quarter of the regular season is no small consideration, but in case you haven't heard, Pats coach Bill Belichick is fairly good at what he does. If he had to, Belichick could probably coach up Brady's wife, Gisele Bündchen, to play QB and go 3–1. Besides, if Brady wins an injunction to play in September but later loses an appeal, he runs the risk of having to sit out four games at a more critical point of the season. When training camp opened last week, he took most of the reps with the first team. Why not let backup QB Jimmy Garoppolo prepare to start the first four games rather than wonder whether some court ruling will put him back on the sideline at any moment?

Giving up the fight wouldn't bring Brady, a four-time Super Bowl champion, the kind of clear-cut victory he's used to, but he would still come out ahead. He should know, from having ended so many games this way, that sometimes the best way to secure a win is to take a knee. □



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